AFGHAN NAPOLEON

Published in 2021 by
Haus Publishing Ltd
4 Cinnamon Row
London SW11 3TW

www.hauspublishing.com
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Diary transcription by General Wadud and Ali Nazary

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Extracts from *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979–89* by Rodric Braithwaite produced with permission of Oxford Publishing Limited through PLSclear

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Extract from *New Selected Poems* by Robert Lowell courtesy of Farrar, Straus and Giroux/ Macmillan

Extracts from *Pour l'amour de Massoud* courtesy of XO Editions

A CIP catalogue for this book is available from the British Library

The moral right of the author has been asserted

ISBN: 978-1-913368-22-7
eISBN: 978-1-913368-23-4

Typeset in Garamond by MacGuru Ltd
Printed in the UK by Clays

AFGHAN NAPOLEON

The Life of Ahmad Shah Massoud

SANDY GALL

Dushanbe
UZBEKISTAN
TURKMENISTAN
TAJIKISTAN
CHINA
Kulab
Amu Darya
Termez
Farkhar
Khoja Bahauddin
Mashhad
Shiberghan
Kunduz
Taloqan
Amu Darya
Mazar-i-Sharif
Farkhar
IRAN
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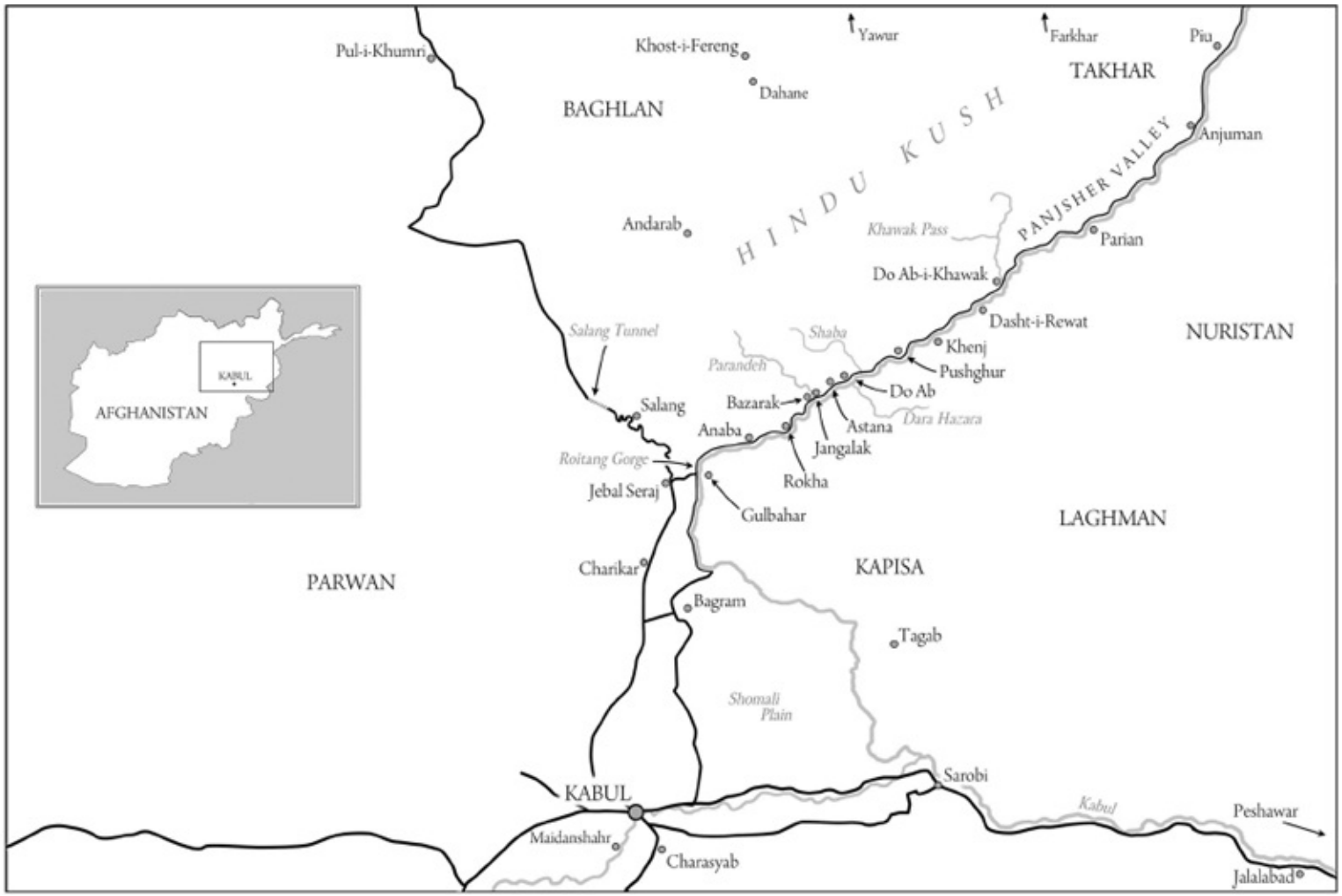
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BAGHLAN
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PANJSHER VALLEY
Anjuman
Andarab
Khawak Pass
Parian
Do Ab-i-Khawak
Dasht-i-Rewat
NURISTAN
Salang Tunnel
Shaba
Khenj
Parandeh
Pushghur
Do Ab
Salang
Bazarak
Dara Hazara
Anaba
Astana
Jangalak
Roitang Gorge
Rokha
Jebal Seraj
Gulbahar
LAGHMAN
KAPISA
Charikar
PARWAN
Bagram
Tagab
Shomali Plain
Sarobi
KABUL
Kabul
Peshawar
Maidanshahr
Charasyab
Jalalabad
KABUL
AFGHANISTAN

Contents

Introduction

Rory Stewart

Author's Note

Translator's Note

Prologue

1. The British 'Find' Massoud
2. Were We Nearly Shot?: Meeting Massoud
3. The Boy Who Loved Playing Soldiers
4. The Coup that Failed: Exile in Pakistan
5. Bombed by the Russians in the Panjsher
6. The Russians Propose a Ceasefire
7. Massoud Deals with the Russians
8. Marriage and War
9. Defeat and Failure: 'Am I Afraid of Death?'
10. The Russian Perspective
11. A Winter Offensive
12. Massoud Takes Farkhar
13. Expanding into the North
14. The Russians Prepare to Withdraw
15. Massoud Captures Kabul
16. Under Siege: Massoud in Kabul
17. Tea and Rockets with the Taliban
18. Mortal Enemies

19. Massoud Retreats from Kabul
20. A Low Ebb
21. ‘My Father was Incorruptible’
22. Massoud Visits Europe
23. How They Killed Massoud
24. The Eve of Assassination
25. A Final Encounter

Epilogue
Acknowledgements
Select Bibliography
Notes
Index

Introduction

Rory Stewart

This is a book about two heroes. The explicit hero – the Napoleon – of the book is Ahmad Shah Massoud. But the other is Sandy Gall himself. And this is also a story of how an encounter between two heroes can create a new birth in midlife.

Gall opens the book with his two-hundred-mile trek across Afghanistan in 1982 to meet Massoud. He does not explain to us that perhaps one of the reasons he finds it a little tiring is that he is about to turn fifty-six. (I found a similar trek difficult enough at twenty-nine). Nor that, as the book opens, he had already been a reporter for more than three decades. He had reported the Hungarian Revolution and the horrors of the Congo. He had covered the Six-Day War, the Yom Kippur War, Pol Pot's Cambodia, and Mao's China. He had been detained in Uganda. He had been on the beaches when the US marines were landing in Vietnam on 8 March 1965. And he had been on the Saigon Boulevard ten years later, still reporting – a tall figure in a short-sleeved safari suit – after the last helicopter flew off the US embassy roof and when the Vietcong tanks were rolling into the capital. He was on the ground reporting the Suez Crisis when Massoud was still an infant.

And, characteristically, Gall's modesty extends to underplaying the extraordinary risk involved in walking two hundred miles, with a film crew, into Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. On this trip, he was almost killed, first by mujahideen who thought he was a Russian solider and then by Russians when he was with the mujahideen. One of his cameramen was wounded in Kabul in 1994.

Another, Andy Skrzypkowiak, was murdered by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's forces in 1987 as a punishment for reporting on Massoud. War reporting is a tough profession requiring considerable courage. And thirty years as a war reporter could have made Gall very cynical about someone like Massoud. After all, his working life had involved countless interviews with rebel commanders in towns, jungles, and deserts, surrounded by their militias and caught up in the paradoxes of national liberation, communism, modernity, superpower competition, and religion. He had met Robert Mugabe, Idi Amin, and Joseph Mobutu.

And yet the meeting with Massoud changed Gall's life. Gall is the beau idéal of a Scottish gentleman – slender, erect, and dignified; unquestioningly brave; and, under his calm exterior, profoundly romantic. He entered the Panjsher reflecting on the exact cadence of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's rendering of Schubert and Goethe's 'Heidenröslein'. He shows a quiet patriotic pride in Gerry Warner, the British intelligence controller who sent an officer to find the 'Afghan Napoleon', but he also has a resigned realism about the slowness of British bureaucracy in providing anything substantial to Massoud over the following years. He saw much in the Afghan landscape that reminded him of the Scottish Highlands, 'without the whisky'. He found, in this man young enough to be his son, a heroism that seems to have appealed to every fibre of his being. And, at an age when many of his contemporaries were preparing for retirement, Gall found in Afghanistan the central subject of the rest of his long life.

Gall went on to shoot extraordinary films in Afghanistan, capturing unforgettable images of the resistance to the Soviets. This book includes glimpses of his great craft in film-making ('Smart was shooting wide open, on fast film stock…'). He went on to write deeply informed articles and books about the country and then to establish and run a remarkable charity for Afghans who had lost limbs – providing aids, prosthetics, and therapy. His wife and daughters in turn absorbed themselves in Afghanistan, living there, dedicating themselves to understanding it, and working with Afghans – a tribute, one senses, both to their husband and father and to Afghanistan itself. This book, written when Gall is ninety-three, is part of that extraordinary second life of commitment and absorption that began almost forty years earlier with a long walk across the Afghan hills.

Gall's subject, Massoud, is now concealed behind the grandeur of his

reputation. His photo – twenty times life-size – is the first thing you see on arriving at Kabul's airport. The main traffic circle in the city is named after him, there is a national holiday in his honour, and his mausoleum looms over his native valley, larger than the Tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae. He is the 'national hero of Afghanistan'. His Soviet opponents praised him as their finest adversary, who, despite very limited international support, managed to hold out for eight years against at least nine assaults by Russia's finest troops. And he remained the Taliban's most feared opponent – which is why they conspired ultimately to assassinate him shortly before 9/11. The American writer Robert Kaplan compared him favourably as a guerrilla commander to Mao Tse-tung and Che Guevara. Others have praised his charm, his keen intelligence, his modesty, his faith, and his deep knowledge and love of classical Persian literature.

And yet, Massoud is also a difficult hero for the modern age. He is not a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King, Jr. Rather than being committed to non-violence, his entire adult life – from the age of twenty-two to his death at forty-nine – was spent at war, as an Afghan mujahideen commander. So it has never been difficult to point to paradoxes and tensions within his life story, right from his beginning as part of a student Islamist movement that included some of the most radical and notorious figures of the later civil war. Although he moved to the moderate wing of the movement and openly argued for democracy and tolerance, he always remained a mujahid, fighting for Islam as much as for Afghanistan. And although he acquired some notable allies from the majority Pashtun group, many Afghans continue to fundamentally associate him with the Tajiks.

The Soviet troops in Afghanistan, against whom he fought in the 1980s, sometimes tried to provide basic medicines for the local population and help in resolving local disputes, but they also killed, often indiscriminately. (One Soviet soldier, remembered as 'cheerful and good company', describes throwing a grenade into a room, entering to find a dying young mother and seven children under five, still moving, and then machine-gunning them to eliminate witnesses). The mujahideen in turn killed and mutilated Soviet prisoners and members of the regime forces, if on a lesser scale. During this period, Massoud felt forced to sign a ceasefire with the Soviets – which bought him time to re-equip and recover, but which exposed other resistance groups to the full brunt of the Soviet

assault. He struggled to prevent his troops from stealing and looting, and he had to make complex compromises with foreign intelligence services to receive supplies and support.

Things got even more horrifying after the Soviet withdrawal. In the 1990s, he was appointed defence minister during the Afghan civil war, in which rape became, for the first time in the Afghan conflict, a full weapon of war. He was in command of the air force bombers and the many artillery positions on the heights around Kabul – including the notorious battery on 'TV Hill' – that shelled residential areas of the capital in which rival Afghan factions were based. In 1994, his troops participated in an attack on the Afshar neighbourhood that has been described by Human Rights Watch and his opponents as a massacre of civilians (which is denied by his supporters and at least one journalist at the scene). And almost regardless of the details of responsibility for individual incidents, he and his fellow leaders manifestly failed to create a remotely stable or prosperous state. If anything, Afghanistan under the cabinet in which he served was as bad as – some would say worse than – it had been under the Soviet invasion. The brutality and corruption of the commanders across the country were beyond imagining and created much of the support for the Taliban.

All of this background has engendered deep cynicism about Massoud. Senior United States officials in particular used this to justify their refusal to support him. Thus Richard Armitage, the United States deputy secretary of state, said to the BBC that, because of the atrocities committed by his troops, Massoud was an 'unacceptable ally'. And Robin Raphel, the assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, said that Massoud had simply charmed and fooled Western observers by saying, 'Choose us because we are smart, because we read books and can talk to you.' But he was, she concluded, a 'warlord … in it for himself and the Tajiks'. 'It wasn't,' she argued later, 'for us to choose between warlords, who were tainted. Let them choose among themselves.'

Gall's book is a thoughtful and convincing rejection of such cynicism. Massoud was not simply 'another warlord'. He displayed, for twenty-five years, a better model of leadership, a greater ability to govern well, and a more impressive moral character than the other commanders. He eschewed Hekmatyar's model of Machiavellian plotting, collaboration with Pakistan, and internecine murder; he did not copy Abdul Rasul Sayyaf's brutality or

fundamentalism; unlike the Taliban, he did not provide safe haven to al-Qaeda; and he never sought to emulate the immense wealth of Atta Mohammad Noor or the decadent lifestyle of Abdul Rashid Dostum. While the other commanders were frequently abroad cultivating foreign backers, he remained in Afghanistan throughout the Soviet occupation, living in the simplest conditions in the Panjsher. His forces were more disciplined and professional. He maintained his distance from the Pakistani intelligence services. And, unusually among the commanders, he focused on protecting the civilian population and set up a transparent tax system to raise funds (albeit supplemented by emerald and lapis mining). He was personally austere and incorruptible. He had a far more progressive and sincere vision of a democratic, multi-ethnic Afghanistan.

The United States' attempt, therefore, to portray the commanders as, in Raphel's words, 'all bastards' were lazy pessimism (just as the unrealistic expectations of the post-9/11 wars was lazy optimism). They were shying away from the – admittedly very difficult – tasks of finding better allies and identifying, amongst all the horror and compromise of war, better leaders. It was cowardice to pretend that everything would be solved by leaving Afghanistan alone. By washing their hands of Massoud, the United States and the West simply created an opportunity for other, less scrupulous, nations – Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and others – to intervene in their place and prop up far worse warlords.

It is not easy to make the case for Massoud, partly because, unusually amongst independence leaders, Massoud had very little interest in aggrandising himself or reflecting on his own personality and life with foreign reporters. All the most patient attempts by interviewers to try to divert him onto anecdotes were met by sober accounts of military tactics or political strategy. Unlike other commanders, who were famous for their exuberant private lives, for their collections of fighting dogs or *buzkashi* ponies, or for much more disturbing stories of addiction and abuse, Massoud ensured that his personal life remained domestic and private.

The memories of his contemporaries, collected by Gall, give glimpses of 'how thoughtful he was, how respectful, how always aware of people's dignity'. They show him paying repeated respect to an elder whom he has had to replace as village commander, borrowing money to feed fleeing civilians, and advising his

younger brother when they were children (‘Meditate every day for half an hour, your forehead resting on your fingertips; you’ll see your relationships with other people will change’). There are moments of grandeur too. As the Taliban advanced on Kabul, for example, he walked out alone into the Taliban camp to try to negotiate a compromise. He did so despite all the warnings by his men that he would be killed by the Taliban as soon as he approached. By force of personality, and by appealing to the honour of the Taliban commander, he returned, alone and alive. (The Taliban commander was subsequently sacked by Mullah Omar for letting Massoud escape.) Again, when every commander was seizing property in Kabul, he refused, saying (in a phrase that caught some of the fervour of this taciturn and often modest man), ‘If Afghanistan falls, then it does not matter if I own the whole country. And if Afghanistan is free, I do not need a house, for I will be everyone’s guest.’

But the unique interest and importance of this book lies in his diaries, which have never been previously published. Each excerpt is beautifully rendered by a team of translators including the pedantic, subversive, erudite, earthy, and playful Bruce Wannell. Each is elegantly framed and put in context by Gall – who is careful to ensure that his own encounters with his friend are balanced with Afghan voices and even Soviet accounts. The diaries reveal the texture of Massoud’s soul. It is here that we see his moments of intense doubt and pain – the sleepless nights; his punishing self-analysis; his sense of failure and awful responsibility; his fear that he cannot last. We read about his shame at having to send his family into exile. And we also see his absolute lack of vanity, and how fairly and generously he wrote about his adversaries.

At times, he seems to be a young Oliver Cromwell, putting his entire trust in God. (‘It is only awareness of sin that makes me fear death, otherwise I have no particular enthusiasm for this life.’) And at other times he is a Lawrence of Arabia, worn down by the compromises, the loss of his closest friends, and the surrounding brutality. His fragility is balanced by his desire to keep educating himself – in Arabic grammar, oratory, and jurisprudence – and his attempts to achieve distance from his achievements, to analyse the previous year and plan the next. Above all, the diaries are a testament to his willpower. He fought for a decade to take Kabul, and then, having won it, lost again. And was driven back again, after fifteen years of fighting, to his beginning. And then picked himself

up to persist again. Gall's publication should encourage the family members who own the rest of Massoud's diaries to come forward and have them published in full. They are an extraordinary inward portrait of a very rare human being.

Massoud was only forty-nine when he was assassinated – almost the age Gall had been on that boulevard in Saigon. He was not granted Gall's boon of a long, and quite different, second half of life. And yet there is something very special embedded in this book – the partnership of an older Scot and a younger Afghan; of the quieter wisdom of age and the fierce blaze of youth that shaped and inspired the older man; of two distinct representatives of that very difficult idea that both of them shied away from – heroism.

Primarily, it is the diaries that echo Massoud's life of commitment in this most violent of contexts – a heroism alien and troubling, sticking like a fish bone in our throats – and that seem to echo Robert Lowell's great memorial of a warrior of another time, 'lean as a compass-needle':

> He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,
> a greyhound's gentle tautness;
> he seems to wince at pleasure,
> and suffocate for privacy.

Above all, they evoke a man who

> is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely,
> peculiar power to choose life and die—

Author's Note

I first met Ahmad Shah Massoud in the summer of 1982, when he was a young guerrilla commander fighting the Soviet army in the mountains of Afghanistan. It was the third year of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Little genuine news of the war, in which hundreds if not thousands of innocent people were being killed, was available. As a journalist, I wanted to know what was going on. A British official described Massoud to me as a potential young Tito, comparing him to the leader of the Partisans in Yugoslavia, which intrigued me.

By the time in 1982 when I made a one-hour documentary for ITV, *Behind Russian Lines*, Massoud had survived six major Russian offensives. His resilience, intelligence, and military skill in the face of relentless Soviet bombing and scorched-earth tactics were immediately evident, as was his charisma as a leader of his people. Four years later, he expanded his operations to the north, and by the end of the 1980s he had established control across the north-east of the country, playing a critical role in forcing the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Within three years, he had overthrown the communist government, ending Russia's grip on his country and proving himself Afghanistan's foremost military commander.

I visited Afghanistan repeatedly over the years and came to know Massoud well, often seeing him in the thick of operations, and so, when it came to writing his life story, it was natural for me to include first-hand reporting of those times. Much later, I discovered from his son, Ahmad, that Massoud had kept a diary for much of his life; thanks to the family, I was able to view some volumes. The result is a book that is not a classically straightforward biography, but one that blends my personal recollections and extracts from Massoud's diaries with a

more traditional narrative of his life. My daughter Carlotta, an author and journalist with the *New York Times*, has helped me over the last few years to assemble all the parts and complete the manuscript.

Massoud's greatest achievement was without doubt his military resistance against the might of the Soviet army, and this book focuses in depth on that period. The Soviets unleashed a ruthless campaign of carpet bombing and massacres on the rural population that forced an exodus of 5 million people, a third of the entire population, to neighbouring countries. The scale of Soviet atrocities led Felix Ermacora, the United Nations special rapporteur on Afghanistan, to warn in 1986 that the war was 'approaching genocide, which the traditions and culture of this noble people cannot permit'.* An estimated 1 million Afghans died in the ten years of the Soviet occupation, a trauma from which the country and its people have yet to recover and which explains a great deal of the continuing strife. By resisting and by forcing a Soviet withdrawal, Massoud and his fellow mujahideen taught an important lesson to the world: a superpower had no right to subjugate a smaller, less developed country.

This book also covers his struggles within the mujahideen movement and his later resistance to the Taliban and al-Qaeda, which was essentially a continuation of his resistance to outside interference. I have also sought to show the inner depths of the man, for Massoud, as his diaries reveal, was an able administrator, a strategist, and a cultured man in the best Afghan tradition, with a love of poetry. When he left Kabul for the last time in 1996, he took with him a library of 2,000 books.

I chose the title *Afghan Napoleon* when I learned from Gerry Warner, the former Far East controller at MI6, that soon after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan he had instructed one of his officers to go out and find someone among the Afghan mujahideen who was of the calibre of the young Napoleon – the artillery officer who became Europe's greatest military commander and the emperor of France. The British spotted that same potential in Massoud, and his military exploits soon proved them right.

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* Felix Ermacora, *Report on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan* (United Nations, 1986), 24.

I have been asked about the use of 'Afghan' to describe Massoud, since the term can be synonymous with 'Pashtun' in certain contexts within the region.

Massoud was an ethnic Tajik. The use of variations of the word ‘Afghan’ for the people of the region may go back as early as a third century ad Sasanian example, according to the distinguished anthropologist and author Louis Dupree, and the earliest reference by a Muslim source occurred in ad 982.* Afghans themselves referred to their area variously as Kabulistan, Zabulistan, Khorasan, and Turkestan until 1880, when Amir Abdur Rahman created modern Afghanistan with a process of ‘internal imperialism’, whence comes the debate. Abdur Rahman himself referred to it as Yaghistan, which translates as ‘land of insolence’ – ‘the insolence of equality felt and practiced’, as Dupree explained, ‘the insolence of bravery past and bravery anticipated’. I use ‘Afghan’ in the title, and throughout the book, for a British and North American readership, among whom the word is understood to mean nothing more or less than someone from Afghanistan of any ethnic group. Massoud, a patriot who fought for a united and free Afghanistan, would, I am sure, have understood.

* Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Oxford, 1973), xvii–xix.

Translator's Note

The late Bruce Wannell, who translated the first volume of Massoud's diaries from the 1980s, made several observations on the particularities of the writings. His observations are reproduced here.

1. On the name 'Panjsher': historical sources are unequivocal that the correct name originates from 'panj' ('five') + 'hir' ('mountain'), not the latterly popular etymology 'panj' ('five') + 'shair' ('lion'), however much that might puncture the boasting of the locals!

2. Afghans use people's professional status and qualifications as part of their names, considering it disrespectful to use merely a personal name; family names, as such, rarely exist, whereas pen names or noms de guerre do, as also tribal affiliation: hence 'Mufattesh' ('Investigator'), 'Moallem' ('Teacher'), 'Mamur' ('Officer' – usually civilian), 'Khan' ('Squire'), 'Mullah' ('Cleric'), 'Zabet' ('Junior Officer'), 'Tsaran-wal' ('Military Gendarme'), 'Ulus-wal' ('Provincial Governor'), etc.

3. Massoud often – but not always – uses 'we', the first-person plural, out of politeness, so as to avoid the boastful and egotistical 'I' first-person singular. This is in accord with standards of modesty and courtesy in the Persian-speaking world, i.e. it is not at all the grandiloquent 'royal we' witnessed in English; however, it occasionally makes it difficult to decide whether Massoud has made a decision or come to a conclusion unilaterally or through a process of consensus-building and council meetings, as in the Islamic shura and Pashtun

tribal jirga, which was also one of his strengths as a leader. I have, in translating, tried to remain faithful to the use of the first-person plural, even though I suspect in many cases the first-person singular is meant: caveat lector!

4. On the Panjsher dialect, at least as far as transcribed by General Wadud: there seems to be equivalence/overlap between ‘l’ and ‘r’, which gives the confusing reading ‘Krashnakov’ for the rifle Kalashnikov, as between Persian ‘talkh’ and Pushtu ‘trikh’ (‘bitter’). Likewise, between ‘s’ and ‘sh’ and between ‘j’ and ‘ch’, as evident in local names such as Chamalwarda, Karbashi, etc. Syntax is occasionally inelegant to the point of ambiguity or near-incomprehensibility (e.g. labyrinthine ‘ezafa’ constructions, elisions, confusion of grammatical tense, person, idiosyncratic use of historic present in reported speech, etc.), and is only to be resolved with repeated reading aloud in an attempt to hear the particular ‘voice’. Obviously, Massoud writes more or less as he speaks, which in the more continuous passages of description and direct observation (e.g. his moments of self-doubt, the ambush at Pushghur, the death of Haji, the rocket attacks, and the escape of the de-mining officer prisoners) can have a wonderful liveliness; there are occasional echoes of literary style as well. Much, however, is military telegraphese: extremely abbreviated, opaque to the non-specialist (e.g. lists of Russian military hardware). As always in translation, familiarity with context is more than half the battle.

5. Afghan months are as in our astrological charts, i.e. the old Babylonian calendar, applied to solar months as opposed to the Islamic lunar months, the day being deemed to start the previous evening at sunset.

Prologue

The two friends slipped easily into a familiar routine. Ahmad Shah Massoud, the legendary Afghan guerrilla commander, was sitting down for an interview with two Arab ‘journalists’, and his best friend and frequent interpreter, Masood Khalili, leaned in towards him to translate his answers. They were so close that their shoulders were touching.

It was mid-morning on Sunday, 9 September 2001 in Khoja Bahauddin, Massoud’s northern base on the bank of the Amu Darya, the classical Oxus River, which marks the northern boundary of Afghanistan: a fitting place for martyrdom.

Several people were in the room. Asim Suhail, Massoud’s press secretary, was present, and Fahim Dashty, an Afghan reporter, appeared at the back with a small camera. Massoud asked his intelligence chief, Engineer Aref,[1] to go down to the ground floor to monitor the satellite telephone. Aref left the room, followed by Jamshid, Massoud’s cousin and close aide.

The ‘reporter’ read out his questions; the ‘cameraman’, having placed the camera very close to Massoud, had moved some distance away.

The questions were odd and the camera too close, but Massoud said, ‘Let’s begin.’ As Khalili turned to translate the first question, he saw a blue flash streaking towards them.

A powerful blast shattered the morning, engulfing the room in fire, changing the history of Afghanistan and the world.

Guards rushed to the room. They found Massoud barely alive. He urged them to look first to Khalili. Suhail was dead; Dashty was badly burned. The ‘interviewer’ was torn apart by explosives that had been strapped round his

waist.

The ‘cameraman’ leaped out of the window and tried to escape. The guards chased him to the river and shot him as he waded up to his waist in the water.

1

The British ‘Find’ Massoud

Christmas 1979 was memorable for all the wrong sorts of reasons, at least for the leaders of the United States and Great Britain in particular. While Margaret Thatcher, the British prime minister, her United States counterpart, President Jimmy Carter, and their respective families were preparing to celebrate a convivial Christmas – one at Chequers, near London, and the other at Camp David in the Appalachian Mountains near Washington – the Politburo in Moscow was putting the finishing touches to its top-secret plans to invade Afghanistan and remove from power the brutal and erratic communist prime minister, Hafizullah Amin. Moscow had been debating whether and how to get rid of the increasingly unpopular Amin for several weeks, and any doubts it may have had were dispelled by news from Kabul that he had just had the president, Nur Mohammad Taraki, murdered – suffocated by his own guards.[1]

The Soviet president, Leonid Brezhnev, was especially angry, having promised to protect Taraki. ‘What a bastard, that Amin, to murder the man with whom he made the revolution,’ he told his colleagues in the Kremlin.[2] KGB head Yuri Andropov, ‘mortified’ by his department’s failure to keep control of events, was equally determined to get rid of Amin and install a more manageable leader. With its influence in Kabul now almost zero, and popular unrest in Afghanistan growing, the Soviet leadership turned increasingly to the idea of using force. In fact, Amin had appealed repeatedly to the Kremlin to send troops to Afghanistan to help him keep control of the country. Brezhnev had always refused. Now he saw the request as a perfect opportunity.

The crucial meeting of the Politburo took place on 12 December. Andropov

claimed that Amin was increasingly in contact with the CIA – he had studied in America – and warned that if he were to shift his foreign policy towards the West, it could have serious implications for the Soviet Union. Finally, the meeting decided unanimously to send in the troops.[3] Amin seemed to be oblivious to what was coming.

The Russians invaded on 25 December, Christmas Day, stormed Amin's palace, and killed him. The invasion came as a shock to the leaders of the West, particularly to President Carter, who, despite having seen satellite images of the Soviet military build-up, which the CIA provided in abundance, apparently did not believe the Russians would actually take the plunge. On 28 December, he rang Thatcher. 'We discussed at length what the Soviets were doing in Afghanistan,' she wrote in her memoirs, 'and what our reaction should be. What had happened was a bitter blow to him.'[4] She was less surprised than Carter, being more sceptical of Russian intentions. 'From now on,' she added, 'the whole tone of international affairs began to change, and for the better. Hard-headed realism and strong defence became the order of the day. The Soviets had made a fatal miscalculation: they had prepared the way for the renaissance of America under Ronald Reagan.'

Soon after the invasion, Gerry Warner,[5] the newly appointed Far East controller of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, better known as MI6), was briefing one of his brightest young officers about a mission which was a direct result of the Soviet invasion, and about the long conversation between Thatcher and Carter. During that conversation, they had jointly agreed they would give the Afghans all the help they could against the Russians – short of going to war. Warner's briefing concluded with what has become a famously worded assignment: 'I want you to go and find Napoleon when he is still an artillery officer.'[6]

'Why Napoleon?' I asked Warner later.

'Because he was a colonel of artillery who became Emperor of France,' he replied. 'That was the sort of person we were looking for.'[7]

And they found him, as we shall see.

So, the 'very, very able and intelligent chap', as Warner described his emissary, an ex-soldier in receipt of what might have been considered a very tall order, packed his bags and set out soon afterwards for Islamabad, the garden-city

capital of Pakistan, designed by Greek architects, where MI6 had an office in the British High Commission (as the embassy is known, since Pakistan is part of the British Commonwealth). After listening to the advice of his colleagues there, he drove up the Grand Trunk Road – a relic of the days of the Raj – to Peshawar, the capital of what was still known as the North-West Frontier Province (and is now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province), the stepping stone to the Khyber Pass and Afghanistan.

Peshawar was the sort of place where, not very far from the old- fashioned, down-at-heel, very British Dean's Hotel, he might have seen – as I did one day – Afghan horsemen in turbans trotting across a bridge into the main bazaar. They made me think of Kipling, his love affair with the tribal culture of the frontier, and that great epic poem, 'The Ballad of East and West'.

Peshawar was also the centre of the fledgling Afghan resistance movement. This was the place to put your ear to the ground. This 'our chap' did, ending up with a name which would become world famous: Ahmad Shah Massoud, a dynamic young Afghan mujahideen[8] commander who was already making a name for himself fighting the Russians. The word 'massoud' – also spelled 'masood' or 'masud' – means 'lucky' in Persian; Commander Massoud, as he became, was to be almost unbelievably lucky until one day, in September 2001, his luck ran out. But that was still a long way away in the future.

The MI6 officer from London returned in due course and reported back to his superiors. 'We realised three things,' Warner said. 'First of all, the Americans and the Pakistanis were in complete control of all the people in the south of Afghanistan, who on the whole were more extreme Muslims – Islamists.'[9] He was referring to the warlike Pashtun clans, such as the Haqqanis, who lived mainly in the south of Afghanistan, made up about 40 per cent of the population, and were also a substantial minority in Pakistan. There are about five million Pashtuns in Afghanistan and ten million in Pakistan, a consequence of the redrawing in 1893 of the Afghan–Indian (now Afghan–Pakistani) border, known as the Durand Line, by the British civil servant Henry Durand and the Afghan ruler Amir Abdur Rahman.

The second thing, Warner said, was that 'the CIA were very sensibly banned from going into Afghanistan themselves, because any direct conflict between the superpowers, in the shape of the CIA and the KGB, might well have had serious

repercussions. The third thing and the most important, really, was that we had heard of this chap up in the Panjsher' – Ahmad Shah Massoud. Unlike the CIA, MI6 did not have a blanket ban on entering Afghanistan but, 'as with all our operations, we sought political clearance on each individual operation. The CIA could not get to Massoud in the Panjsher. We could, and by so doing could make an important and distinctive contribution to the overall support of the mujahideen.'[10]

But first, the MI6 officer sent to Pakistan to find an 'Afghan Napoleon' had to be sure he had the right man. To gauge how the war was going, the British tracked Russian internal communications through their secret listening station, the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), presumably picking up accounts of battles. 'This man stuck out to me as somebody who was prepared to do things and get on with it and so – I suppose you could say – I selected him,' the MI6 officer said. The aim was 'to make things as bloody difficult for the Soviets as we could and support what we thought was the right sort of person to do it.'[11] The British noted that Massoud had established territorial control of the Panjsher Valley, pushed government troops out of much of the valley, and occasionally sent units to hit Russian forces beyond. Warner agreed with his emissary: 'Massoud's quality impressed the first people who met him straightaway,' and he noted that Massoud, for his part, was 'quick to realise that this was an opportunity' and that 'the sort of help we were prepared to offer was in fact very worthwhile.'

With what seem higher moral principles than were often displayed in the Cold War, Warner decided to cross the border into Afghanistan to satisfy himself that the Afghans 'knew what they were getting into'. A small jirga, a tribal assembly, was arranged in a school, presumably in the border area – he could not remember where:

> Maybe half a hundred Afghans [including] three or four with long white beards, sat in a dusty schoolyard. I said I had come because I wanted to tell them that if they wished [to have] our help we were prepared to give it, but I wanted to be sure they understood that, if we did give them our help, they would be able to fight longer, but that would mean that more of their young men would be killed. And I did not believe they would be able to beat the Soviets, or that the Soviets would leave.
>
> This was early 1980. So, there was a bit of muttering, and the oldest and wisest of the group said: 'Please tell this gentleman that we will be grateful for his help, but we are not asking for it. If he wishes to give it to us, that is fine, and you may also tell him that the Russkis, the Soviets, will leave

Afghanistan within ten years.'

Not that bad, since they left in nine! But I wanted to make quite sure that I was not doing an 'America in Vietnam' and encouraging people to fight who didn't want to fight. So, our consciences, as far as that was concerned, were clear. And then of course it was what our chap would have said to Massoud when he went to the Panjsher.[12]

Then, having decided Massoud was their man:

[MI6 decided] what we were going to do, and how we were going to sell this to everybody else, and worked out a plan, which was really to go and find out from him what he needed and what help we could give. We put this proposal to the foreign secretary, Lord Carrington, and Mrs Thatcher. They approved, with the caveat that we should not offer to provide arms.[13]

MI6's next step, with the Foreign Office's approval, was to send in a small team to meet Massoud. 'It went really well, and subsequently we gave Massoud really important help – communications, short-range wireless and some long-range wireless. We never gave him any lethal equipment. We did bring out some of his leading people for training, both in a Gulf country and in Britain.'[14] Some of this training took place in country houses with cooperative and discreet owners. In other cases, the trainees were housed in old army camps.

The British realised they could not make the kind of contribution in financial terms the Americans were already making, Warner said, 'but we could make a difference with somebody who was isolated, out on his own, far away, and whom we thought we could help.' As the junior partner, MI6 had to coordinate with the CIA, which was already deeply involved in supporting the Afghan mujahideen and had the money. Ironically, while the CIA – which was heavily influenced by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) – always had reservations about Massoud, the Russians, including some very senior officers like General Valentin Varennikov, a veteran of Stalingrad, saw him as a cult figure. General Ter-Grigoryants, who fought against Massoud, also called him 'a very worthy opponent and a highly competent organiser of military operations':

His opportunities for securing weapons and ammunition were extremely limited, and his equipment was distinctly inferior to that of the Soviet and [Afghan] government forces. But he was nevertheless able to organise the defence of the Panjsher in a way which made it very difficult for us to break through and to take control of the valley.[15]

Despite American reservations about Massoud, however, the MI6 officer who ‘found’ Massoud went to Washington and argued the case for him, he said, with a well-known CIA chief: ‘They eventually said, “OK. We’ll give you what you want, and we’ll support you on this, and you’ll have this as your territory, and we’ll do our own thing.” And, as we know, they went after [Gulbuddin] Hekmatyar, God bless them, etc.’[16] He smiled.

2

Were We Nearly Shot?: Meeting Massoud

In the summer of 1982, three television colleagues and I trekked for twelve days with a mujahideen arms convoy over the mountains and across the scorchingly hot plains of Afghanistan in search of the young Massoud, already known for his role in the resistance struggle against the Russians. To reach his stronghold in the Panjsher Valley, north-east of Kabul, we walked about 150 miles from the border through a largely deserted landscape, most of the inhabitants having fled as refugees to neighbouring Pakistan. It was the third year of the bitter war between the mainly conscripted 80,000-strong Russian 40th Army and the Afghan mujahideen – literally 'holy warriors' – who were said to be fighting the Russians as bravely and determinedly as their forefathers had fought the British in three wars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

For much of the time, as my small television team and I toiled over mountain passes and waded across fast-running rivers, we were shadowed by Soviet reconnaissance Antonov aircraft buzzing like hornets overhead. Never very far away were rocket-armed Mi-24 'Crocodile' helicopter gun-ships, instantly recognisable by the menacing beat of their rotors, and the latest Soviet jets – Sukhoi Su-27 fighter-bombers, NATO code name 'Frogfoot', which came at you faster than the speed of sound to drop their deadly cargo with a devastating roar.

Were they really tracking us in particular, or merely keeping an eye on just another mujahideen convoy moving through the mountains? Probably the latter, although if they had realised the convoy was intended for Massoud, whom they considered public enemy number one, it would probably have become a priority target. Yet we were bombed only once or twice on the way in, rather desultorily,

causing little damage. But later – once we were in the valley and the Russian offensive known as Panjsher VI had started – it was a different story: the bombing became frequent, heavy, and, on several occasions, alarmingly close.

We had started out from Peshawar, crossing the border at a village called Terri-Mangal – named after the two tribes who lived there – and walked north through the empty villages of Ningrahar Province, their inhabitants driven out by Soviet bombing and ground attacks. Only a few old men had stayed on to look after their property, mainly livestock and houses. In the two and a half years since the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, between four and five million Afghans – men, women, and children – had fled their homes, most to seek safety in the refugee camps of Pakistan.

The narrow gorge that forms the entrance to the Panjsher Valley, renowned for its beauty, lies 64 miles north-east of Kabul by road.[1] But the arms convoys went cross-country, which meant we had to do the journey on horseback or on foot, and for some not-easily-explicable reason, the producer Nigel Ryan and I chose to walk, although both of us could ride. It turned out to be a very punishing twelve days.

We eventually arrived at the top of the Darra, the main side valley of the Panjsher, on the eleventh day of our journey. The last mile or two were particularly exhausting, I remember. It was getting dark and it was hard to see the path on the last steep slope leading down to the village of Abdullah Khel. At one point, I tripped and fell, and got up in a rage, cursing, ‘This is ridiculous; we’re going to break a leg at this rate. I’m going to stop here for the night and go on in the morning.’

Our guide, Gul Bas, a normally easy-going individual, came striding up the slope to deal with this latest rebellion. He and I argued for several minutes, I in monosyllabic pidgin, until, in a fury, he flung his torch on the ground and stomped off down the hill, venting his anger in Persian. Finally, after more argument among our group, I was persuaded to follow him down the hill in the gathering gloom to the village, which turned out to be not very far away. Once there, Gul Bas promptly disappeared – glad to be rid of us at last, no doubt – and we were taken to a large house where we were to spend the night. It was only years later that an Afghan friend said to me, ‘I was surprised when I read your book that you didn’t mention that you were nearly shot by the local guard

commander.’[2]

‘Nearly shot?’ I thought at first he was joking. Then I realised he was serious. ‘What on earth do you mean, Mehrabodin?’

‘Don’t you know the story?’ asked Mehrabodin Masstan, a young medical assistant who interpreted for the French volunteer doctors and spoke excellent English as well as French.

‘What story?’

‘Well, when you arrived that night, the local guard commander thought you were Spetsnaz [Russian special forces]. There were rumours that the Spetsnaz were going to attack the village, and when he saw you he was convinced you were the Spetsnaz. You were obviously not Afghans, and he thought you looked like *shurawi* [Russians].’

Mehrabodin explained that the commander laid an ambush and gave orders to his men to open fire as soon as we entered the village, but changed his mind at the last minute. He had decided that we must be the advance party and that, if his men opened fire on us, the rest of the Spetsnaz would follow and kill him and the rest of the people in the village. So, he called off the ambush.

‘Later,’ Mehrabodin said, ‘when he saw you having tea with the *malik* [headman] and the elders, he went up to them and said, “Why are you entertaining these *shurawi*?” “What *shurawi*?” the *malik* asked. “What are you talking about? They aren’t *shurawi*; they’re Western friends who’ve come to help us in the jihad.” The commander got quite a shock, I can tell you.’

Mehrabodin burst out laughing. He thought it was a tremendous joke. I have often wondered if his story was true. It was a chilling thought that we might have been shot dead before we had even started.

The next day, we got up early, had a cup of tea and some *nan* (unleavened bread), and started walking down the valley on the last lap of our journey. It was a beautiful day, gloriously sunny, the temperature perfect for walking. The landscape had a simplicity and innocence that reminded me of the Swiss Alps: ripening cornfields neatly terraced between high stone walls, and lush green meadows framed between towering mountains that stretched away in front of us. The path led us along a fast-running stream, part of the elaborate irrigation system based on the Panjsher River which supplies the entire valley and which the Russians did their best to destroy. The irrigation channels run for mile after

mile, usually high above the river from which they initially draw their water, and often on both sides of the valley. They are a masterpiece of simple engineering, giving the valley an almost geometrical structure, as well as a philosophical dimension of man taming nature.

Even here, in the side valley of the Darra, they had built a miniature system of irrigation channels. We walked down one of the channels for a good hour or so, the crystal-clear water sparkling in the sunshine and flanked by a long line of beautiful tall blue chicory flowers. It was thirty years since I had studied German at university, but for some reason – the rhythm of the walk, the beauty of our surroundings, the peace the valley exuded that morning, and above all the exquisite colour of the blue flowers – that morning brought to mind a forgotten phrase, *die Blaue Blume*, the 'blue flower' of the German Romantics, of Goethe, Heine, and their contemporaries. Why exactly the German Romantics had chosen *die Blaue Blume* as their emblem I could not quite remember. But I did decide that the blue flowers of the Darra – and I don't think I ever saw them in such profusion anywhere else in Afghanistan – were the 'blue flower' of the Afghan resistance.

The thought of Goethe reminded me of his early love poems, of 'Willkommen und Abschied' ('Welcome and Farewell'), which describes the excitement of a young and innocent love affair, the hero's impatience to see his beloved dramatically expressed in the phrase '*geschwind zu Pferde* ' ('quickly to horse') as he gallops off to see her. Then there is Goethe's enchanting ballad 'Heidenröslein' ('Rosebud on the Heath'), set to music by another great Romantic, Franz Schubert, and sung hauntingly by the late great lieder specialist Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, with the rise '*Röslein, Röslein, Röslein rot'* ('rosebud, rosebud, rosebud red') and then the dying fall '*Röslein auf der Heiden'* ('rosebud on the heath'). All of that went through my mind as we strode along the irrigation channel, the water gurgling pleasantly in our ears.

After leaving the channel, we walked for three or four hours beside the river until, by late afternoon, we reached a village called Tambonnah near the bottom of the Darra, just before it joins the Panjsher. There we were directed to a farm, which belonged to a couple of brothers who had been part of our convoy. They spoke some German, wore leather jackets that they must have acquired in the West, and, like so many young Panjsheris, had been drawn back to the home

valley by the magnetic personality of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the ‘young Lochinvar’ of his day. It was here, we had been told, that we would meet Massoud, either that evening or the following morning. In the meantime, we were led past the big farmhouse to the edge of a field where, in the shade of a huge mulberry tree, carpets and cushions had been spread. We sat down gratefully and were offered – with that never-failing Afghan hospitality which seems to prevail even when the country is at war – *chai sabz*, sweet green tea, which I always found the ultimate elixir. We had been walking all day and were hungry, thirsty, and tired. Afghans can walk all day – and night if necessary – and show no sign of tiredness, but this was beyond us – beyond me, at any rate. I sank back on my cushion and drank the green tea, thinking that if this was not heaven, it was the next best thing: bliss.

After prayers, oil lamps were lit and a simple supper served. There was no sign of Massoud, so at about 10 p.m. we unrolled our sleeping bags and stretched out with the sound of the river in our ears, gazing up at the stars, gold dust against a black velvet sky. This was always the moment of the day I savoured most, especially after a long hike.

The next morning at 7:30 a.m., as we sat waiting for our tea, there was a stir in the trees behind us, downriver, and I turned to see a small group of men approaching in single file. They were led by a youngish man, slightly built and hawk-faced, his *pukul* (a flat Chitrali cap) tilted well back on his head, and I realised with a sense of real excitement that this must be Massoud, the man we had crossed half the world to meet. He was dressed in what looked like a Russian khaki tunic and trousers, and Russian army boots. He walked easily but purposefully, leaning forward slightly as he breasted the slope, his men following him with the same relaxed gait. There was no bodyguard, no obvious security. We were, of course, in the middle of the Panjsher Valley, with its tradition of defying all intruders.

‘Then he was among us,’ I wrote at the time, ‘and everyone was standing almost at attention, as deferential as Afghans can ever be, and I was aware of an aura, a mystique that seemed to set him apart. As I shook his hand, I noticed above all his eyes, quick and intelligent.’[3] He was fine looking, with aquiline features and the face, I thought, of a thinker, but, as we discovered later, he was a man of action as well. Above all, he had an air of authority and maturity

remarkable in a man of only twenty-eight.

We were all about to sit down when a Russian jet whined ominously overhead, and immediately Massoud and his entourage walked towards the house, with the brothers signalling to us to follow. We all crowded into a high-ceilinged, carpeted room and sat in a big circle within the dirty whitewashed walls, which were decorated with postcards of Mecca. Tea was brought with hot oiled *nan* – the first time we had eaten the rather dull unleavened bread cooked like this – and it was surprisingly good. Someone brought Massoud a small tray with a cup and a separate pot of 'milk tea', which is served already mixed and considered something of a delicacy. We also drank it that day, as Massoud's guests. Sitting cross-legged in the corner, sipping his tea, Massoud rapidly read a sheaf of letters and messages and, equally swiftly, wrote replies.

Afterwards, as he talked to the brothers and other locals, he struck me as being a good listener. I guessed this was how he received the bulk of his information – by letter and word of mouth. At the end of each conversation, he would say a few decisive words, as if he were passing on his instructions. We were watching Massoud acting as his own chief of staff, receiving intelligence and issuing orders so that everyone in authority knew what was expected of them. Throughout, sipping his milk tea, reading, writing, and issuing instructions, he remained calm and collected, although he knew, even if we did not – yet – that a new major Russian offensive, Panjsher VI, was already underway; the sky would soon be full of helicopters and jets bombarding the Panjsher's villages and hamlets, providing cover for dozens of T-54 tanks, armoured personnel carriers (BTRs), and eventually thousands of Soviet infantry, rampaging up the valley and shooting everything in sight.

In that big room, packed with close to a hundred Panjsheris, all mujahideen to a man, who in the past two and a half years had experienced five major Russian attacks – what the Americans in Vietnam called 'Search and Destroy' operations – there was no sign of alarm or fear. Massoud's coolness and lack of fuss was impressive. He generated calm and confidence despite the odds, it seemed to me. People would come to speak to him, stooping down deferentially to address him. He would give his answer briefly, crisply, and then go back to his writing. He struck me, on the admittedly brief evidence of that morning, as being cool and efficient, his manner low-key: there was no drama, no histrionics, and he was

very much in charge. I concluded my account at the time like this:

> As I sat watching Massoud and his mujahideen squatting on the dusty carpets in this big cheerless room … I thought: this is how Tito and his Partisans must have looked in the 1940s. But, leaving aside the fact that Tito was a Communist, was Massoud another Tito? It was too early yet to say, but he had a tautness about him, and, one felt, an integrity that was impressive. He looked an honest as well as an intelligent man.[4]

At the end of the meeting, someone came and told us Massoud wanted to talk to us, and they led us to a small room off the main hall. A few minutes later, he came in alone, shook hands with each of us in turn, and invited us to sit down. There were no chairs, only – as in most Afghan houses – a carpet on the floor and cushions along the walls, so we sat on the floor, a habit with which we would all become very familiar. I never found it the easiest of positions, being much less supple than the Afghans, who sit on the floor from childhood. First he spoke to Jean-José Puig, smiling and friendly, and then he turned to us.[5]

Nigel Ryan (the producer) and I had discussed our plan of attack, and he had urged me to make as strong a case as possible, since we were not sure how well Massoud had been briefed about us, and it was vital to get prompt action on the equipment. So, I immediately launched into my carefully rehearsed speech. ‘Commandant Massoud,’ I began in French, ‘we have come to make a major one-hour documentary for British television about the resistance to the Russians in the Panjsher and your role as its leader.’ I added, rather pompously, ‘It’s a big-budget film; it will take three months to make and will be shown to millions of people in Britain – and, we hope, in the rest of the world.’ We wanted, I went on, to film the mujahideen in action, and to record a long interview with him in Persian, so that he could express himself as freely as possible, and have it translated when we got back to London.

He listened attentively, nodding approval to everything except the request to follow him around, filming him, saying that it would be difficult because he moved all the time and it would be hard for us to keep up. This was a disappointment, since the strength of a documentary very often comes from fly-on-the-wall material, but he said it in such a way that I felt we would get more or less what we wanted – which, in fact, we did. I went on to stress how important it was that the camera equipment, which had got held up because of the bombing, should be brought in as quickly as possible, so that we could start

filming immediately. To this, Massoud replied that he had already given orders for it to be portered in.

He then turned to the military situation. He was a first-class briefer, as we were to learn, and unlike most Afghans he was nearly always accurate when it came to figures. There were, he said, 12,000 Russian and Afghan army troops in Rokha, the main village in the valley, 20-odd miles down-river. Despite the minefields round their positions, he could easily have driven them out, he claimed, but for one thing. He leaned forward to give emphasis to his words. 'I have information from a very sure source in Kabul that the Russians are going to launch a major ground attack within a week.' We were to discover that Massoud had exceptionally good intelligence sources in the Afghan Ministry of Defence in Kabul and in the Afghan army, which enabled him to be always one step ahead.[6]

Although we had heard rumours of another possible offensive, his words came as a shock. There had already been five major attacks on the Panjsher Valley since the Soviet invasion in 1979, following the conventional pattern of spring and autumn offensives: two in 1980, two in 1981, and one so far in 1982: Panjsher V. This would be Panjsher VI, and although I was excited by the film possibilities it might offer, I had to admit to some apprehension about being on the receiving end of a Russian offensive.

'Because of this, we have to conserve our ammunition,' Massoud went on, 'so we are not going to attack Rokha [the location of the Russian base] now. We've also heard that the Russians are sending in 1,200 more men as reinforcements to Rokha, but the mujahideen near Kabul have sent us messages saying they will not let them pass.'

I wondered privately if this was wishful thinking on the part of the Kabul mujahideen, but made no comment. We asked him about the Russian dispositions at Rokha. He said, 'The government positions are always the same. First they have mines, then Afghan troops, then Russians behind to stop the Afghans running away. Without the Russians behind them, the Afghan army wouldn't fight.' Massoud permitted himself a hint of a smile. He departed soon afterwards and did not reappear with his small party of about twenty men until the light was beginning to fade on the mountains and it was time for prayer. They spread their *pattus* – light blankets which the mujahideen were never

without – on the ground in two lines, kneeling in the stubble of the recently harvested wheat field, their weapons by their side, facing towards Mecca.

Led by a young mullah who himself looked like a mujahid, they went through the simple ritual of the evening prayer. I wrote in my diary, ‘They made a moving and impressive sight, bowing their foreheads to the ground in unison, the purple mountains behind, the air cool, the river loud in the background.’ They were all young men in their twenties or thirties except for two: a big barrel-chested man, Haji Saaduddin, who was nearly always at Massoud’s side carrying a briefcase, in which I later discovered he kept the campaign money; and a rather dour man, Tajuddin, who I thought at the time bore a startling resemblance to Asterix the Gaul. He, too, was nearly always with Massoud, playing a key role as his man Friday and later, to everyone’s surprise, as his father-in-law.

We again had supper à *la belle étoile*, on carpets from the brothers’ house. Massoud read and wrote letters, his profile etched sharply in the lamplight. Afterwards he sat slightly apart and talked at length to one man, keeping his voice low and private in a manner that Afghans, used to being nearly always surrounded by other people, have made something of an art form. I have no idea what Massoud was saying, but I imagine he was discussing the coming offensive and giving the local commander – which is what I took the other man to be – his instructions.

Finally, he drew Puig aside for a private word while we waited, a trifle anxiously, to hear our fate. Puig was back in five minutes, *pattu* draped across his shoulder like a Roman senator’s toga, to announce that we were all going by jeep – cries of delight – to a nearby village called Sangana, where we would have a ‘hot wash’ and spend the night. ‘Tomorrow,’ Puig continued, ‘you – Sandy – Nigel, Charles, and Tom, and also Tony, will go up the valley to Khenj.’ He and Jean-Philippe, the Aide Médicale Internationale volunteer doctor, were staying behind at Massoud’s request to discuss the possibility of building a hospital in the valley. I asked Puig to remind Massoud to have our camera equipment brought in as soon as possible – he assured me he had already reminded him and would do so again. ‘He has already given orders to bring it here,’ he added.[7]

The jeep turned out to be a war trophy, captured during Panjsher V earlier in the year when the mujahideen had shot its two Russian occupants dead, leaving

two neat bullet holes in the star-chipped but otherwise intact windscreen. We had to push-start it, but otherwise it bore us in style the few miles down the Panjsher's one and only road, which ran between the foot of the mountains on our right and the brawling river. Sangana, completely in darkness when we arrived, was – as we saw next day – a pretty village shrouded in trees, which the Russians would later cut down. Nigel and I were taken to a house which had two very special attributes: the opportunities to have what were called a 'hot wash' and a 'long drop'. For the hot wash, you stood naked on a raised mud floor and poured warm water over yourself from a large tin – the first proper wash we had had since leaving Dean's Hotel a fortnight before; the other 'mod con', the long drop, was merely a hole in the floor over which you squatted to relieve yourself as best as you could. I remember another occasion when a friend lost his glasses down a different long drop and wondered if the glasses would ever reappear, on the principle that things lost in a glacier eventually resurface. We never discovered the answer.

3

The Boy Who Loved Playing Soldiers

Ahmad Shah Massoud was born at the beginning of September 1953 in the tiny village of Jangalak on the Panjsher River, 60-odd miles north-east of Kabul.[1] His family was relatively well-to-do and owned a large house with an imposing archway overlooking the Panjsher, often said to be the most beautiful river in Afghanistan, with mountains both in front and behind. He studied architecture at Kabul Polytechnic Institute (now called Kabul Polytechnic University), and later built his own house halfway up the mountainside above the old house, with a swimming pool, a big garden, and a circular library with stunning views for his large collection of classical Persian poetry.

Massoud was the second son of Dost Mohammad, a colonel in the Royal Afghan Army, and his modern-minded wife, Bibi Khorshaid, who taught herself to read and write when she was middle aged and who wanted education for her daughters as well as her sons. He was named after the famous young Afghan cavalry officer who commanded the bodyguard of Nadir Shah, the Persian emperor. In 1747, when Nadir Shah was assassinated, the young officer, Ahmad Shah, escaped to Kandahar with his 4,000 cavalrymen[2] and the priceless diamond the Koh-i-Noor, Mountain of Light,[3] which the emperor wore on his sleeve; Ahmad Shah was also in charge of the treasury. Later he was elected head of all the Pashtun tribes, and became the first ruler of Afghanistan.

Massoud's father was posted to various commands during his career and, as was the custom, took his family with him. One posting was to Herat, the famous ancient city near the western border with Iran, under whose massive citadel walls both Genghis Khan and Tamerlane fought their battles. It is also famous

for its once-magnificent Musalla Complex, built by Queen Gawhar Shad – wife of Shah Rukh, who was the son of Tamerlane – and described by the travel writer Robert Byron as ‘the most beautiful example in colour in architecture ever devised by man to the glory of his God and himself’.[4] Only six of the original minarets remain. According to the American historian Nancy Dupree, most of them were deliberately destroyed in 1885 ‘under the direction of British troops’ and on the orders of the king, who feared a Russian attack and wanted ‘a clear field of fire’.[5]

The Russian attack never materialised, but by then it was too late, Dupree wrote, and ‘these great works of art were irretrievably lost’. Today, after decades of neglect, Afghan archaeologists are excavating the ruins and discovering fragments of glazed tile panels that bear witness to the splendour of the mausoleums, according to the South African architect Jolyon Leslie, but the minarets remain in a parlous condition.

The young Massoud went to primary school in Herat. Later, when his father was posted back to Kabul, he was sent to arguably the best school in Afghanistan, the famous Lycée Esteqlal (‘Independence high School’), a French-Afghan Eton – although it is government-funded, not fee-charging – where he learned French. At the age of sixteen, the biographer Michael Barry wrote, he already had well-defined features, with a ‘noble, aquiline nose, his expression thoughtful, serious, withdrawn – except when lit up by the famous smile, and his eyes sparkled’.[6] In photographs of Massoud as an adolescent, he is always – like his brothers and sisters – in the school uniform of the 1960s, first at primary school and then at the lycée: white shirt and dark trousers, Western-style, and jacket and tie for big occasions; and for his sisters, black skirt, black stockings, and a white scarf – although, before the end of the 1960s, ‘chic, upper-class girls dared to go out bare-headed and miniskirted on the Kabul University campus’.[7]

From 1964 to 1971, as the son of an officer, Massoud moved in a circle that could not have been more contemporary and smart, as Barry wrote. Classes were taught by French or Afghan tutors who themselves had been educated in France, and were conducted in three languages: Persian, Pashtu, and French. Massoud, like all the other pupils, would learn to pronounce French correctly, even if his vocabulary was too small for his own liking due to lack of practice. ‘Speak to me in French, even if I reply in Persian,’ he told a friend, the architect Heshmat

Feroz, a few months before his death.[8] The lycée stood for ‘carefree friendship’ and ‘European sports’, Barry wrote. Later, Massoud would enjoy kicking a ball around with fellow mujahideen when they had some time off. Asked in the eighties and nineties which was the happiest period of his life, he always answered, ‘the lycée’.[9]

The French language, politically free of any colonial taint in Afghanistan, was for Massoud his apprenticeship to Western civilisation, which he absorbed through this French filter. He was passionately interested in the life, experiences, and writings of General de Gaulle: a premonition, perhaps, of his own spirit of resistance. In 2000 and 2001, Amer Saheb, known as ‘The Leader’ or ‘The Boss’, demanded of all his Afghan friends who had lived in France – Mehrabodin Masstan, Homayoun Tandar, Heshmat Feroz – minute details of the governmental, diplomatic, administrative, and military systems of Paris. The years 1964–71 were the decisive, intellectually formative years for ‘Frenchy’ Massoud – or ‘The Frenchman’ or ‘The Parisian’, as he was called by opponents from the conservative Islamist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar to the Taliban, in an effort to discredit him.

Massoud never learned English, whence came, undoubtedly, the greater sympathy afforded him by French journalists, politicians, and humanitarians compared with Anglophone correspondents and officials. The Americans were particularly cool towards Massoud, the most important resistance leader of the 1980s and 1990s. When I first met Massoud, we spoke in French; we had no alternative, having no interpreter. My French was reasonably good. I had studied French at university and spent long holidays in France with a French family, speaking only French, much of the time with the energetic and loquacious père de famille, who bred oysters, milled flour, shot pheasants, ran a restaurant, and drove me round Brittany in his car.

Massoud was a brilliant pupil, hard-working and gifted at mathematics, but highly strung, like most precocious adolescents. His friends remember him as charming, intense, secretive, mature for his age, serious. He had a passion for universal justice, an almost messianic altruism, which, according to Barry, tortured the young Massoud with ethical and political questions – as if it were up to an adolescent, which he still was, to understand and then put to rights the world order, or at least that of his own country. Sport and chess: yes. Frivolous

distractions: no.

A formative experience for him as a teenager was the Six-Day War, in which Israel's air force attacked Egypt in June 1967. The fourteen-year-old Massoud sat up with his father listening to news reports from the battlefields on the BBC's Persian service and hearing the defiant statements of Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser and other Arab leaders. His interest in the military campaign became an obsession, and he would lecture his classmates on the daily developments in the fighting during breaks. He later told researcher Peter DeNeufville that the Six-Day War had made him determined to be a soldier and had also been his first exposure to Islamic nationalism, and that it had been profoundly moving to hear the experiences of Jordanian soldiers fighting to defend Jerusalem, and Egyptians and Syrians fighting to defend their countries.[10]

Massoud devoured his schoolbooks and explained them to his friends. The revision classes in mathematics, physics, and chemistry which he gave for free to all his classmates, in his parents' villa behind the Cinema Bahaaristan, assuaged a thirst to share and to teach. But that was not enough to satisfy him. His father had given him a taste for order and authority, an interest in things military, and a sense of technical solutions, of rigour and discipline, of a practical and orderly universe. He developed a strong sense of fairness.[11]

One day, his school friends discovered with amazement Massoud's readiness to stand up for the underdog. On the school bus that took pupils home from the lycée, three big louts were bullying a frail, much younger boy. At the stop, the young Massoud pushed his satchel of books into a friend's hands and, with three single punches – separate, precise, each delivered straight to the solar plexus like bolts from a crossbow – laid the three bullies out cold on the pavement. When I asked his brother, Ahmad Wali, if this was true, he simply looked at me and nodded silently, as if the memory of the event still dumbfounded him, but also as if to say 'That was my brother'. Massoud was to repeat this feat later, when he knocked out a Russian tutor at Kabul Polytechnic Institute.

Massoud acted as mentor and tutor to his brothers, especially Ahmad Wali, the youngest. Thirty years later, the instructions of his big brother still echo in Ahmad Wali's memory: 'Play sport, Ahmad Shah [Massoud] told me: take exercise, work your muscles. Read, not too much, but in an organised, planned

way. Strengthen yourself spiritually, too. Meditate for half an hour, your forehead resting on your fingertips; you'll see, your relationship with other people will change.' And when Ahmad Wali took it upon himself to master not French but English, Massoud advised him, 'Do an hour's cycling and repeat, each time, fifty words of vocabulary.'[12]

Massoud poured his worries into his faith, Barry relates. His friends and even his brothers and sisters were astonished at the strength of his piety, as strong as the fervour of a traditional Panjsheri peasant. The practice of reading the Koran was already declining among the young educated class; the social obligations of this ritual made the braver spirits at the lycée impatient, Barry suggests. The very evident devoutness of Massoud irritated more than a few. At one evening prayer meeting, rows of pupils were prostrating themselves behind the imam. In the front row, Massoud was kneeling with his habitual zeal. A joker switched the lights off. Massoud's forehead bumped into the priestly rear, making the cleric turn round, scandalised, and bark, 'Who did that? Was that you?' Jokes aside, Massoud's religiosity never struck me as particularly different to that of any other Afghan of his standing. He obviously lived as a good Muslim and left it at that.

In 1971, when he had passed his *baccalauréat* with flying colours at the age of eighteen, Massoud took perhaps the key decision of his life. His French teachers urged him to apply for a scholarship in France, Barry wrote. Fellow students with less impressive marks had already been successful. But Massoud was not interested. There was so much to do at home; he was happy to be in Afghanistan. In his personal diary, Massoud describes finding his own way in his final year at school. He recounts how he had struggled to grasp some subjects at school and suffered psychologically when he did not succeed:

> I must say I am lazy in body and soul, which is a bad habit, causing me to be indecisive, and I used to give up quickly after only a weak try. It was in the twelfth class that I became a bit more self-reliant, and, by the mercy of God, my struggles ended happily and I became a different person.[13]

There developed a sort of family tug of war over his future. The young Massoud apparently told his father he wanted to follow in his footsteps and asked him to put his name down for the military academy in Kabul. Strange as it may seem, however, both his father and his elder brother, Yahya, opposed the

idea. Massoud had excelled in science at the lycée and Yahya wanted him to be a scientist. His father, speaking from his own experience, one must conclude, thought that the peripatetic life of a professional soldier was inimical to family life; Yahya argued that there were more than enough members of the family in the armed forces already.[14]

Looking back on that period of Massoud's life, it was a strange decision. On the only occasion I met his father, long after he had retired and when he was staying with Yahya in Peshawar during the Soviet occupation, he regaled me with reminiscences of how, as a boy, Massoud loved playing soldiers. He described how he marshalled his young friends into two little armies and devised battles for them to fight. His favourite set piece was an attack on a small hill near their house, with Massoud planning both the assault and the defence. Although the old soldier told the story as a joke, laughing a lot, I could see how proud he was of his son's military flair and of the skill with which he orchestrated the battles and adjudged the winners afterwards.

However, and despite Massoud's own wishes, it was finally decided that he would enrol at Kabul Polytechnic Institute, the most recent and most prestigious faculty of Kabul University. Founded in 1967, financed and run by the Soviets, it taught engineering and architecture, the latter of which Massoud studied. Having been brought up in the French educational system, he was now exposed to the very different world of the Soviets. At the lycée, he was taught either by French masters or by Afghans who had been educated in France. At the Polytechnic, he was taught either by Soviet masters or by Afghans who had been educated in the Soviet Union. But whereas at the lycée he had learned French, at the Polytechnic he never learned or attempted to learn Russian. At the lycée he had been steeped in French culture, and now suddenly he was immersed in the very different world of Soviet ideas and ways of thinking. At the lycée, you might say, the role models were Napoleon and Voltaire, or de Gaulle and Rousseau, and at the Polytechnic they were Marx and Lenin – and possibly Stalin.

Kabul was also alive with growing strains of political Islam and anti-communist nationalism. Inevitably, perhaps, given the political climate and his own intellectual curiosity, in his second year at the Polytechnic, in 1972, Massoud became interested in politics. He expressed anger at communist students in his class who insulted Islam. He made friends with two other students

there of Islamist persuasion. One was Engineer Mohammad EsHaq, a fellow Panjsheri, the other Engineer Habibur Rahman. The latter was a member of the Muslim Youth Organisation, which was affiliated with the Islamist religious-political party Jamiat-i-Islami (‘Islamic Society’) whose head, Burhanuddin Rabbani, was a professor of theology at Kabul University, also a Tajik, from Badakhshan. Massoud became Rahman’s assistant and EsHaq was a close friend.

On 17 July 1973, the long, peaceful reign of King Zahir Shah was rudely shattered by a coup staged by his authoritarian cousin and former prime minister, Prince Daoud. Taking advantage of the king’s absence in Italy, where he was having medical treatment, Daoud abolished the monarchy and installed himself as president, virtually for life. In preparation for his coup, Daoud had received substantial support from a number of pro- Russian officers in the Afghan army, and his police now started to monitor students with Islamic tendencies.

Meanwhile, Massoud, exasperated by the increasing arrogance of the communist students at the Polytechnic, and even more so by that of the Russian professors, gave another example of the violent energy bottled up inside himself. One day he had a row with one of his masters, which turned to blows and ended with Massoud unleashing a devastating punch that knocked the Russian out cold. He then walked out of the classroom, the Polytechnic, and, shortly afterwards, Kabul itself. His family did not know where he had gone. In fact, he and a number of fellow militant students, a day or two later, crossed the border into Pakistan.

4

The Coup that Failed: Exile in Pakistan

Massoud's youthful political views as a student could be described as only moderately Islamist, but they were independent enough to attract the attention of the police of the authoritarian new ruler, Prince Daoud, after he seized power in 1973. In the run-up to his coup, Daoud had already courted the support of pro-Soviet officers in the Afghan army. But as a member of the Muslim Youth Organisation, Massoud's friend from the Polytechnic, Rahman, had a mission to encourage Afghan army officers to support the Islamist cause and reject Soviet infiltration. Working as his assistant, Massoud was caught in the crosshairs.

When Daoud failed to persuade the Americans to give him military aid, he turned to Moscow. The Russians were willing to help, but at a price. Growing demands for more Afghan communists in government in Kabul from Leonid Brezhnev, general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, led eventually in 1977 to a very public row with Daoud, who told Brezhnev to his face in the Kremlin that no one would tell him how Afghanistan should be governed. At the height of the argument, in front of senior officials, Daoud virtually turned his back and walked out on a furious Brezhnev – which Kremlin-watchers immediately interpreted as tantamount to signing his own death warrant. Sure enough, in a few months, he was overthrown. The communist coup of 27 April 1978 – the Saur (April) Revolution, as it was known – wiped out Daoud and virtually his whole family in a bloodbath of horrifying brutality, and installed a communist government in power. The new rulers were themselves divided into two wings of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan: the Khalq ('people') and the Parcham ('banner'). Both wings in

turn became so unpopular that the Kremlin was finally forced to invade Afghanistan twenty months later to get rid of the increasingly tyrannical communist dictator Hafizullah Amin and to ensure the survival of communist rule in Afghanistan.

Back in the early 1970s, Massoud – like a growing number of politically minded young Afghans at the time – was vehemently anti-communist, and he had begun to cultivate young Afghan army officers who were anti- communist and pro-Western. Threatened with arrest by Daoud's secret police, the anti-communist Muslim Youth Organisation members were thrown a lifeline from an unexpected quarter. Pakistan's dynamic prime minister, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, saw an opportunity to score off Daoud by offering political asylum and basic military training to Massoud and his friends from the Muslim Youth Organisation, as well as Pashtun firebrands like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who, although not much older than Massoud, had already founded his own party, the more extremist Hisb-i-Islami ('Islamic party'). Thus began the long, tortuous association between the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) and what would later become – after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 – the Afghan resistance, or mujahideen.

The association with Pakistani intelligence was probably the reason why Massoud was approached by his fellow ISI covert 'trainee' Hekmatyar to take part in an attempted coup against Daoud. Massoud at first refused but, when Hekmatyar accused him of cowardice, was stung into agreeing to take part.[1] He would raise the flag of rebellion in the Panjsher while Hekmatyar was busy elsewhere.

In the spring of 1975, when the snows were melting on the high passes, he made his way back secretly from Pakistan to the Panjsher, accompanied by his old friend EsHaq and thirty-seven companions, all armed with Sten guns of Pakistani provenance. Massoud planned to overthrow the Daoud regime in the upper Panjsher Valley and replace it with an Islamic government. The coup began well, with the men even capturing the garrison at Rokha, the main town in the valley, but it collapsed when the promised support from Kabul failed to materialise. Many of the young rebels were killed or captured. Massoud, EsHaq, and eighteen companions, however, managed to escape to the mountains.

According to an exciting anecdote, one night, Massoud hid in a huge tree in

his family's courtyard in Jangalak until he was rescued by his youngest brother, Ahmad Wali, who later became Afghan ambassador to the UK. The story goes that, just as it was getting dark, Ahmad Wali heard rustling in the branches of the tree. Then a loud whisper.

'Wali… Wali!'

'Ahmad Shah? What are you doing in the tree?'

'Hide me in the house!'

'The rebellion – was that you?'

Massoud slithered down the tree and crept into the house. His family members kept their mouths shut.

The fugitives were hiding out in a cave in the mountains above Jangalak, and Massoud had crept down in search of provisions. After a few days surviving on food being surreptitiously sneaked to them by Ahmad Zia, his middle brother, Massoud and his companions slipped over the border into Pakistan. Back in Peshawar, the group were sent to a secret paramilitary centre run by the ISI at Cherat, to the south, but, unsatisfied, Massoud left the centre in mid-1976 and returned to Peshawar.[2] He withdrew into his shell, and settled down to a period of voracious reading, setting himself the astonishing target of three mainly military books a day. He first read Mao Tse-tung's writings about the Long March; then about the epic career of the dashing Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara, who was instrumental in Fidel Castro's victory in Cuba in 1959; then the works of the French left-wing intellectual Régis Debray, who specialised in South America; and, 'most instructive of all', Massoud told me later, a handbook on counter-terrorism by an American general whose name he could not remember. He also found time to devour the memoirs of General de Gaulle, whom he much admired; of General Võ Nguyên Giáp, the redoubtable victor and nemesis of the French at Dien Bien Phu; and of a 'Chinese sage' – most probably Sun Tzu, author of *The Art of War*, a masterpiece on war doctrine and strategy. There were also, of course, the classics of Persian Sufism. Chairman Mao, however, was almost certainly the most decisive influence on Massoud's thinking about guerrilla warfare. '*Le livre de Mao*,' he enthused to me once, '*est très, très bon*.'

His own guerrilla career dominated most of his life: first against Daoud and the Afghan communists; for nine long and desperately hard years, principally

against the 80,000-strong Soviet 40th Army; and, finally, for six years against the Taliban. Despite the Taliban's considerable support from Pakistan, he was still holding them off at the end, in 2001, when he was assassinated.

As a result of his intense self-imposed study of guerrilla warfare, Massoud had little time for anything else. It was a period of deep introspection, during which he thought long and hard about the reasons for the fiasco in the Panjsher – the coup that failed. He came to the conclusions that Islamic militancy, or Islamism, was not sufficient and that, most importantly, he had failed to gain the support of public opinion, which he now realised was crucial.

Masood Khalili, his lifelong friend, explained that there were only two options if you were against Daoud in those days in Afghanistan: Islamism or communism. Massoud had joined the Islamist movement because it was closer to his family background and the beliefs of his father and grandfather than communism and it opposed the authoritarianism of the Daoud government, but not because of any particular conviction for political Islam or any leaning towards religious extremism. 'He wanted as a young man to be against a system which he did not like – against Daoud,' Khalili said. 'I think he found in Peshawar that he was a strong Muslim, but he could not be an Islamist.'[3]

Khalili first met Massoud during his years of exile in Peshawar, in October 1978 to be precise. Daoud was overthrown, but the communists who had seized power were proving even more dictatorial, conducting widespread arrests and killings and sparking revolts across the country. Within a month of the coup, religious elders had declared a jihad, or holy war – which is an obligation for all Muslims – against the communist government, which they saw as atheistic and anti-Muslim. Rabbani, the leader of Jamiat-i-Islami, had invited a dozen young Afghans to a gathering in a small library the group had established, and he asked Khalili, the son of the famous poet and diplomat Professor Khalilullah Khalili, to recite some poetry for the group. Khalili was four or five years older than Massoud, but he noticed the Panjsheri, wearing all-white Afghan clothes and 'listening very carefully, without talking'. Afterwards Massoud introduced himself and said his father and grandfather knew Professor Khalili well. He then suggested they go shopping together the following day in Darra, a famous smuggler's bazaar not far from the city, in Pakistan's adjoining tribal areas.

'For the first time in my life, I saw a hand grenade,' Khalili recounted.

Massoud and his friends wanted to buy some hand grenades to send to the Afghan mujahideen already fighting in Kunar province, just across the border from Pakistan. ‘He was playing with a hand grenade the way my son plays with a toy,’ Khalili recalled. ‘He told me, “This is how you take it and pull it.”’ Khalili demonstrated pulling the pin. ‘Then he asked me, “How much do you have?” I said, “I have $180. I can put in $80 or something?” He said, “That’s a lot.” So he bought about 600. That was my first meeting with him. I don’t think he gave me that money back.’[4]

Around the same time, Massoud travelled north to Drosh on the Afghan–Pakistani border because he wanted to meet the leader of the first uprising against the communist government in Afghanistan. Mohammad Anwar Amin, a subdistrict administrator in the province of Nuristan, had started an uprising against the government in his home valley of Kamdesh. Anwar had been imprisoned by the communists for five months, and was so outraged by the widespread purges and executions that when his family secured his release in September 1978 he immediately took up arms against the government. In the spring of 1979, Massoud joined Anwar in Nuristan and for several weeks worked as his protégé, gaining his first hands-on experience of guerrilla war. It proved formative, since Anwar combined fighting prowess with administrative skills and impressed upon the younger man, among other things, the importance of a military commander’s responsibilities for the housing, nutrition, and public health of the civilian population.[5] It was also then that Massoud took to wearing his trademark *pukul*, the roll-brimmed woollen hat traditionally worn in Nuristan and much of the frontier region, which became a symbol of the resistance.

By May 1979, Massoud had returned to Peshawar, ready and determined to head back to the Panjsher to start opposing the communist government. Another uprising had erupted in the western city of Herat, and the time was ripe. He gathered a group of twenty-four friends and fellow Panjsheris and set off by bus through the Pakistani tribal areas to the border at Bajaur. There they met up with Pashtun tribesmen who had smuggled their weapons around the government checkpoints, and set off across the border on foot.

Within weeks, Massoud made his presence felt, seizing control of several government posts in the valley and sweeping out on to the Shomali Plain to take the town of Gulbahar. From there he organised an attack to cut the Salang

highway, demolishing two bridges and seizing a security post on the main supply route linking the capital with northern Afghanistan and the border with the Soviet Union. The action caused consternation not only in Kabul but also in Moscow, and soon the government mounted a counter-attack.

One day, in a skirmish near Jebal Seraj, Massoud was shot in the buttocks. Luckily, he had with him Kaka Tajuddin, his loyal right-hand man, a small, tough, sharp-eyed Panjsheri villager from Bazarak, whose daughter, Sediqa, Massoud eventually married. Tajuddin was known to the younger fighters by the honorific Kaka ('uncle'), an Afghan form of respect for an elder. The scene in 1979, as described by Tajuddin, had people 'fighting everywhere', and they were 'not militarily trained or organised'.[6] On this particular occasion, Massoud planned a night raid on the local communist garrison. The raid was successful: some enemy soldiers were taken prisoner, and a quantity of arms, including 'three or four Kalashnikov rifles and fifty grenades', were captured. According to Tajuddin:[7]

> In the morning, Ahmad Shah Massoud asked me to go to the top of the pass to see what the enemy was doing. I had gone perhaps ten to fifteen metres when he called me back, and he himself climbed to the top of the pass to see how the enemy was coping with the attack.
>
> After he went up, I waited about half an hour for him and was guarding the weapons. Then I saw him climbing down, bending to the left, scrambling down with his left hand touching the side of the mountain. At first, I thought he was hiding from the enemy, but when he got closer, he told me that he was wounded.

Massoud asked Tajuddin to carry him on his back.

> Our situation became very bad indeed. He asked me if I could give him a piggyback. I was never in such a situation before – we were all new to this sort of situation; you can imagine my worry. After carrying him for about 100 metres we met Commander Ghafour Khan, who asked what was the matter. I said Massoud was wounded. He screamed.
>
> Massoud then asked the commander, who was much bigger and stronger than me, to carry him. He also asked me to go up to the top of the pass and provide covering fire to prevent the enemy from coming up the hill.
>
> He told me to go to the top of the pass for one hour only and keep on firing at the enemy's positions at intervals. We had about fifteen magazines and I went up and fired at different enemy positions, which were far away, but I could see [them] … I rejoined the group after an hour.

Tajuddin found the group at their command centre at Shotul in a state of anxiety.

A mullah had arrived with some milk and herbal medicine to treat Massoud's wound, but his companions were suspicious that the medicine might be poison. Only after the mullah had taken the medicine with the milk himself, and Tajuddin had done the same, did they allow him to administer it to Massoud.

Massoud was lucky: the bullet went into his buttock and did not hit any bones or vital organs. The men laid him on a charpoy, a rope bed, and began carrying him down the mountain, but when they came to an open area they came under attack from government jets. Tajuddin recalled:

> MiG jets started shooting at us with their machine guns. Massoud told us to spread out to avoid being hit. He told me to go near a wall, but I said I would stay there with him. The attack ended and we finally reached the main road at Dolan-e-Tang. We put him in a jeep and drove to Anaba village, where there was a government clinic. The doctor in the clinic was a Communist, a Khalqi [a member of the party's Khalq wing].

According to Tajuddin, the doctor did not remove the burned flesh and debris that came from the bullet; instead, he pushed it all back into the wound and stitched it up, causing Massoud a lot of pain for a long time. Massoud's son, Ahmad, told me later the family was convinced the communist doctor was trying to kill or at least cripple his father. 'For four months that wound was very painful,' Tajuddin said. The fighters began to scatter as Massoud recuperated. Still in pain weeks later, Massoud asked a friendly doctor from Badakhshan to look at the wound, Tajuddin recalled:

> He touched the wound, which looked smooth, but Massoud jumped up in pain. So he opened the wound and cut out the burnt and infected flesh, all the bits of debris, and then stitched the wound back, which left a small depression. He put some antibiotic cream on the wound, and he also gave us three kinds of cream to use on the wound.
>
> Later, because of this incident, Massoud suffered pain every year at that time and also suffered from back pain each year for two or three weeks.

5

Bombed by the Russians in the Panjsher

After his wounding, Massoud retreated with his men to the upper part of the Panjsher Valley to recuperate and regroup. ‘He realised that he had to choose his forces from among volunteers and to train them,’ his friend EsHaq said. Massoud was busy reorganising and training a force when, just seven months after he had taken up the fight against the communist government, an altogether more formidable opponent entered the fray. On 25 December 1979, Christmas Day, the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan.

Massoud’s operations rapidly expanded. The presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan united people behind the resistance, and his force of volunteers grew from a few hundred to several thousand men within months.[1] Massoud began small-scale attacks against government posts inside the valley. Later, he set up a political committee, enrolling his brother Yahya to go round the mosques in every village, talking to the people and rallying them against the communists.

Within months, Massoud’s forces were able to threaten the Russian convoys as they travelled on the Salang highway and as they turned off to Bagram Air Base, the largest in Afghanistan – so it was inevitable he should come under virtually constant attack himself. The Russians launched their first big offensive against him, Panjsher I, in April 1980. With it, as one experienced observer commented, ‘The Soviet Union stepped deep into the quagmire.’[2] For the next three years, the Russians launched two massive offensives against him a year – in spring and autumn – pouring thousands of troops into the valley and bombarding towns and villages relentlessly with helicopter gunships and

supersonic jets. Hundreds of the local inhabitants, mostly farmers and tradesmen, were killed or wounded, and their houses damaged or destroyed.

After our first meeting with Massoud, we left Sangana for Khenj early the next morning as the sun was rising, enjoying the rare luxury of being driven. It was a beautiful day, the sky pale blue with not a cloud to be seen, the sun already warm. We were surrounded by mountains, scree at their foot, spurs of naked rock farther up, and the ridge line high above us. The only road up the Panjsher Valley ran beside the river, which foamed and swirled over huge rocks, eddying in deep green pools before turning, sparkling in the sunshine, down the valley towards its junction with the Kabul River. A hundred miles and more to the south, below the ramparts of the great fort at Attock, the waters would join with the mighty Indus.

The road to Khenj provided us with a graphic picture of what the five previous offensives must have been like. Wrecked BTRs, lorries, and several T-54 tanks lay battered and burnt beside the river or in it. One was almost submerged, its gun pointing disconsolately at the sky. The Russians had been ambushed by the mujahideen hiding in the rocks above the road, who had picked them off with deadly rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers. This was very much a case of the biter bit: the RPG was an extremely effective Russian weapon, expertly copied by the Chinese and bought by the CIA on the black market for distribution to the mujahideen. But not all the destruction was from previous offensives. In one village, we were shown two huge craters beside the road, made, we were told, by Russian bombs dropped only the day before.

We took two hours to reach Khenj, and were just about to sit down for tea in the filthiest teahouse I had ever seen, the walls black with comatose flies, when our host, Jamil, an excitable-looking man in his forties, appeared. We recognised him at once as one of our escorts with the arms convoy we had travelled with from the Pakistan border, but also because he had a curious feature – he had no thumbs. Trying to fish one day with hand grenades, he made the mistake of holding on to the grenades after pulling out the pins until they exploded and blew his thumbs off.

Massoud had obviously wanted to send us somewhere safe. Khenj, however, turned out to be a hotspot plagued by constant Russian air activity. In a previous offensive, the Russians had bombed the southern part of the town quite heavily,

and Jamil's own house, high up and with a stunning view, had two large holes in the wall of the living room made by stray rockets. The next day, our host took us for a walk, pointing out the damage caused by the Russians. Not only had they sent tanks and infantry up the valley, he explained, but they also dropped airborne troops by helicopter on two mountains overlooking Khenj, from where they shot up the town, doing considerable damage. The Russians had stayed for three weeks, Jamil said, using it as an advance headquarters while they pushed up the valley to Dasht-i-Rewat, famed for its emerald mines, where the road ended. The invaders had parked their tanks beside the river, leaving behind – apart from their rubbish of empty Bulgarian ration tins and cartridge cases – a broken-down T-54, a waterlogged BTR, several lorries, and an Afghan army mess truck.

On our way back to the house, we passed some boys playing a war game involving a mock air raid with 'live' ammunition, plenty of which lay scattered around. They came running past us, making an 'attack' on one another with home-made wooden models of Russian jets, which they would have seen almost every day of their lives, loosing off their 'rockets', adapted from single bullets which went off with a realistic hiss and puff of pink smoke. Jamil and his friends laughed and applauded, but I cursed under my breath, yet again, that we had no camera. Nigel, in his role as producer, enthused that the boys' antics would have made a 'marvellous sequence'. It told the whole story, he said, of how they had grown up with the war. It was part of their lives. If we could have filmed it, it would have made a tremendous impact on a British audience, he declared. 'When we get the camera, we'll come back and film it,' I said, equally enthusiastically. But even as I spoke the words, I knew we wouldn't. Television news is ephemeral. You see a scene like that once, and only once.

The next day, we had a grandstand view of the Russians bombing a village near Khenj, and the proximity of the attack convinced Jamil the Russians knew of our presence and even that we were staying in his house. He therefore made a decision that saw us leaving the house at six next morning, munching a dry piece of bread but without the comfort of a cup of tea, to trek up a nearby mountain and spend the day in a cave, following the example of the women and children of Khenj. Jamil insisted we did this two days running, which I found not only a waste of time but extremely uncomfortable, as the caves were bitterly cold.

Finally, after a second frustrating and uncomfortable day up the mountain, and increasingly conscious that we were missing gripping film sequences of the Russians bombing and strafing defenceless villages, I decided we must go back down the valley and regain contact with Massoud.

So, accompanied by Tajuddin, Tony and I set off after supper and strode down the valley in the warm darkness. There was no moon and we saw no one. The Russians rarely operated at night – except for special forces – and if we had bumped into a mujahideen patrol, they would have recognised Tajuddin. After about three or four hours of steady walking, we saw in the distance the lights of a solitary vehicle bouncing up and down towards us. It was Massoud's captured Russian jeep with the two bullet holes in the windscreen. Sitting in the front seat and grinning at us, his piratical features only just recognisable in the dark, was Agha Gul, who had been in charge of our arms convoy. He indicated with a jerk of his head that we should climb in, explaining that Massoud had sent him to fetch us because Panjsher VI, the latest Russian offensive, had just started.

Massoud had told us his information was that it would start within a week, and in fact that had been only four days ago. We scrambled in gratefully, but as Tajuddin clasped the door handle and was about to follow suit, Agha Gul barked at him like a sergeant major, causing the poor man to fall back, having obviously been told in no uncertain terms that he was not coming with us and would have to walk back to Khenj. I felt sorry for him as we watched his forlorn figure disappear in the darkness while we reclined in the relative luxury of a springy Russian jeep.

That night, we slept in a house in Do Ab ('Two Rivers'), arriving well beyond midnight, after everyone else had gone to bed. Our host, the only fat Afghan I ever remember seeing in the Panjsher, lit our way to a large upstairs room, the floor covered with recumbent figures. One of them was Massoud, whom I just glimpsed as we were shown to the few empty spaces remaining. I lay down on the carpet, pulled the *pattu* someone had provided round me, and was soon fast asleep. It had been a long day, and we must have walked ten or more miles. When I woke – only a few minutes later, it seemed – the mujahideen were already getting up. It took them virtually no time to dress, since they always seemed to go to bed partly clad. I saw Massoud pulling on his boots, obviously in a hurry. Not knowing if he was aware of our presence, I stepped forward to

intercept him as he made for the door.

'Bonjour,' I said. He stopped and took my hand.

'*Ah, bonjour. Ça va*?' The formality struck me as being more typical of Paris than of the wilds of Afghanistan.

'Are we going with you?' I asked in French.

'We're all going together. The Russian offensive started yesterday,' he said. 'They have a lot of tanks and men farther down the valley at Bazarak.' Bazarak was the next town to Rokha, the Russians' jumping-off point, where they had a base. Seconds later, Massoud was out of the door and clattering down the stairs. We followed, crossing the bridge in the dark and then heading upriver again towards the brothers' house. This time we did not stop but walked fast for half an hour or so until we reached the centre of Tambonnah. A light was on in a big house in the middle of the village square, and people were queuing up to go inside – whether for weapons or medicines, I could not make out. But there was a general air of urgency, and after a short rest the big sergeant major (or so I dubbed him), who always carried the briefcase with the campaign funds, told us to follow him. Massoud had disappeared.

After about two hours of steady walking uphill, we came to a small group of houses clinging to the steep side of the mountain like swallows' nests. We circled round the houses and clambered up a steep rocky slope to a cave, the entrance so well hidden that it was almost undetectable from a distance. Inside, it opened out to accommodate a dozen or so people. A local farmer obligingly spread a rug and a couple of fat cushions on the hard ground.

Suddenly, at about 9 a.m., Massoud appeared and crawled into the cave. I found his calm impressive and reassuring. He seemed to treat the Russian attack almost as routine. In fact, through all the vicissitudes that followed, I never saw him display any indecision, let alone any suggestion of fear or alarm. When he had a moment, he briefed us: the Russians had deployed 300 tanks, BTRs, and lorries up the valley. Four had already been destroyed by mujahideen mines. He thought they were planning to attack up the valley as far as Khenj – poor Jamil, I thought, he will be beside himself and blaming us, no doubt. Between sixty and seventy civilians had been killed in the air raids, Massoud added.

Massoud left the cave as suddenly as he had come, leaving behind as our escort his brother Yahya, who had been a veterinary student at Kabul University

when the communists seized power in 1978. Imprisoned along with thousands of other anti-communists in the Russian-built Pul-i-Charki prison in Kabul, where many were later executed, he was lucky enough to be released after eight months to join Massoud in the Panjsher. He told me he had learned his English thanks to a British Council scholarship. Thank God, I thought, for the British Council, much maligned by the British popular press at the time. It was to prove a huge boon to have Yahya with us, since, apart from Tony, none of us spoke Dari.

That afternoon, there was a tremendous roar from an attacking jet blasting off several rockets, making Yahya, sitting near the entrance to the cave, leap back in alarm. Even I, at the back of the cave – immured in the living rock, as it were – felt a twinge of terror. The jet made three more strikes, each time unleashing a clutch of rockets with ear-splitting effect. I wondered if the Russians knew that Massoud had been there. Otherwise, why should they attack such a remote spot instead of a hundred other places in the Panjsher Valley? Perhaps they knew it was a favourite cave.

After the attacks had finished, we scrambled out of the cave to find that a house at the bottom of the valley was still burning. There was no sign of Massoud, but we gathered he had been in another cave. I spent the rest of the afternoon in conversation with Yahya. Guessing he would pass anything of interest on to Massoud, I deliberately talked up the influence our documentary would have on official opinion in Britain and elsewhere. Yahya listened attentively and said they were very keen to have direct contact with Western governments. The Russian jets did not bother us again that afternoon, although we watched them performing their lethal aerobatics in the distance while we waited for the others – Nigel, Charles, and Tom – to rejoin us. In the meantime, we walked to another village, where we had supper and spent the night on a flat roof open to the stars, literally having to walk a narrow plank to get to it – simple enough in the daytime, but trickier at night. Massoud left at about midnight; Yahya said he always worked at night when there was fighting.

It was three in the morning before the others arrived, absolutely exhausted, with the exception of Tajuddin. He had walked all the way back to Khenj after leaving us with Agha Gul, collected the others, and, after a short rest, walked all night to get to us – a round trip of at least 30 miles, I reckoned – but he seemed unaffected: a man of iron indeed. We were woken at about 5 a.m. by the sound

of Russian mortars or rockets exploding farther down the valley. Yahya urged us to hurry, although we did have time for a quick cup of tea and a piece of *nan*. Just before 7 a.m. we saw four Russian Mi-24 ‘Crocodile’ helicopters circling over the main valley, slow and purposeful, with an ominous precision, safe in the knowledge that none of the weapons the mujahideen possessed could threaten them. The Mi-24 is heavily protected by titanium armour underneath, the only vulnerable area being the plexiglass cockpit; a mujahideen gunner, unless he can get above the helicopter, has little chance of shooting it down. We climbed back up the hill to our cave, but found it occupied by local women and their children, and then tried, without success, to find the cave Massoud had taken refuge in. As a result, we spent the rest of the day, rather uncomfortably, in the shelter of a huge rock overhang.

While the newcomers slept, I had a long talk with Yahya, in the course of which I asked him if Massoud had any ambitions to become a national leader. ‘He doesn’t want to,’ Yahya said, ‘but he realises that one day he must try and build a national movement based on his Panjsheri organisation. You know that leaders come from all over Afghanistan to ask Massoud to give them a commander to lead their men. He instructs them also how they should fight the Russians. He tells them to attack the big bases. We have already made two attacks on Bagram [the main Soviet airbase in Afghanistan] and one on Jebal Seraj [both near the Panjsher]. In the two attacks on Bagram we destroyed thirty-nine helicopters and jets on the ground.’ I took Yahya’s figures with a pinch of salt, but the suggestion that Massoud might be a second Tito did not sound so far-fetched after all.

Not surprisingly, Massoud’s fame went before him, and many young Afghans had flocked to his banner. But not only youngsters were drawn to join his ranks. Waiting for breakfast early one morning, we were intrigued to see that next to our tent was an open-air workshop with the barrels of several Russian guns scattered about. There was a big Zigoyak (an ultra-heavy machine gun); several DShK machine guns (or ‘Dashakas’, as the mujahideen called them); another all-purpose machine gun; and a lighter weapon, a PK (which the mujahideen called a ‘Pika’).[3] As we inspected this arsenal, a man came down the steps from a nearby house, sat down cross-legged and started to carve a piece of walnut with a hammer and chisel. We soon saw that it was intended to be a stock for the

rather rusty PK that the mujahideen had unscrewed from a captured armoured personnel carrier. The Afghan, whose name was Aziz Mohammed, worked fast, and within half an hour had whittled the block of walnut down to the exact shape and fitted it as a stock for the PK. It was a neat job, done with very few tools. Aziz Mohammed owned a small shop in Kabul, where he made and repaired scissors. One day he decided to visit the Panjsher to find out about this man Massoud, whom everyone was talking about. While he was there, a mujahid brought him a broken Kalakov rifle, the AK-74, the newest version of the Kalashnikov, and asked him if he could repair it. Aziz Mohammed not only repaired it but did it so expertly that Massoud, impressed, asked him to stay and work as his gunsmith. Aziz Mohammed said Massoud had promised him a set of new tools, but, he grinned, they had not arrived yet. With them, he said, he could do much more.

Another young man who heard of Massoud's fame and decided to join him was a baker's boy called Gul Haidar, who came from the Panjsher but was working in Kabul. His lowly job was to crimp the bread with his fingertips when sticking it against the sides of the oven to bake it. He told Massoud he would rather shoot Russians, and was recruited on the spot. He soon proved his mettle, becoming expert at shooting up the Russian garrison at their base in Rokha, the principal village at the lower end of the Panjsher. After two weeks of the almost non-stop bombing and ground attacks of Panjsher VI, in which many villages were destroyed or badly damaged, the Russians withdrew to the base in Rokha. Massoud told Gul Haidar to look after us and show us some action, for which, we soon discovered, he had a natural flair.

Short and stocky, with a devilish grin, Gul Haidar arrived next morning with a plan that we should film him and his small unit shooting up the Russian tanks guarding the eastern flank of the base protecting Rokha. I wrote at the time:

> We came to a narrow gully that plunged between the rocks and Gul Haidar left half his men in the shade of an overhang, beckoning us to follow. Carrying camera, recorder, and tripod, we slithered down the dried-up bed of the stream, traversed some scree, and ended on a bare crag that jutted out over the valley. Gul Haidar crawled to the outer edge and waved to us to follow. I crept forwards and peered over the edge. About half a mile away, parked in a line facing us, were several Russian tanks, their guns pointing in our direction. I guessed they formed the outer defences of Rokha. Gul Haidar scanned the hill-top opposite, searching for enemy activity. Charles wrestled the camera up the rock and tried to find a comfortable position from which to film. I trained the binoculars on the tanks and

described the scene to Charles as he struggled to line up the camera and focus.

‘Four tanks in a row,’ I recited. ‘There’s a soldier walking right across in the open behind the middle tank now—’

‘Shhh,’ Charles ordered. ‘I’m running.’ (He meant that he was filming.)

With only the brush of the wind against the crag to break the silence, we lay still, watching the unsuspecting Russians. Charles stopped filming and I continued my commentary.

‘There’s a roadblock by the tank on the left and then, about a hundred yards behind, you can see a house, looks like a CP [Command Post], and a lorry or an APC [armoured personnel carrier] in the shade. Quite a few troops on it, as far as I can make out.’

‘OK, I’m going to do some close-ups,’ Charles announced, and we all fell silent again. Tom was concentrating hard, trying to record the silence of the mountain without getting the boom that wind almost invariably produces on a microphone. Nigel was busy taking stills. When we had all we needed, we backed carefully off the rock and toiled, sweating, up the steep gully. Gul Haidar, who had left three men on the crag below, led us to a terrace planted with young peach trees and from which we had a commanding view of the crag.

Still grinning, Gul Haidar gestured that this was the best place to set up the camera. He raised his hands, ‘Pam, Pam,’ to show that the mujahideen below would, at a given signal, open fire on the Russians.

When we were ready, the mujahideen opened up, their PK light machine guns and AK-47s sounding like peashooters. Puffs of smoke drifted off the crag. After a few moments, the men with the AKs crawled back a few yards to reload, then edged forward and opened up again.

‘Pap-pap-pap-pap-pap-pap…’ The sound bounced off the rock around us. Charles was as tight on the zoom lens as he could go. I felt unheroically nervous, wondering when the Russians would start shooting back, and to allay my fear, I greedily ate peach after peach, the juice dribbling down my chin on to my shirt. Finally, when Charles said he had enough film, Gul Haidar seized the tripod and led us back along the terrace to the path and steeply upwards to the big overhang. As we climbed, panting, the first salvo of Russian mortars or tank rounds slammed into the hillside above us. Charles wanted to stop to film but Gul Haidar hurried us upwards, determined to get to the best and safest vantage point.

I could not help being impressed by the way in which, although he had probably never seen a television crew at work before, Gul Haidar immediately understood what we needed to make a film. Having arrived at the overhang, he put down the tripod and, grinning broadly, enthusiastically indicated where the return fire would fall. Sure enough, it did, grenades and mortars making sharp cracks as they burst on the rocky hillside, the wind immediately sweeping away the smoke. It was extremely difficult to anticipate precisely where the rounds would land, even with me acting as spotter, and in a way the soundtrack of the battle was more impressive. At one point, to generate a little more excitement, Gul Haidar leaped a ditch, sprinted up the hillside and blazed away with his Kalakov. I noticed that his boot was split open to reveal a thickly bandaged toe and he explained afterwards that he had been wounded four times, twice by the viciously tumbling bullet of the Kalakov.

The shooting died away and we started the climb back to the *qarargah* (‘base’): there was no point in hanging about – the Russians might call in the jets or the helicopter gunships. As we followed the

irrigation channel back across the hillside, we filmed a group of Russians or Afghans walking in single file along the skyline of the mountain opposite.

Two hours later we were back in the *qarargah*, tired but jubilant after our morning's work. Because of the delay in getting the camera, it was the only action sequence we had recorded on moving picture.

'I feel much, much happier,' Nigel exulted. 'Without that sequence, I would doubt very much that we had a programme. With it, I feel confident we have. I think we're over the hump.' But we had not finished for the day. The irrepressible Gul Haidar wanted to show off his latest toy, a captured Russian automatic grenade launcher, an AGS-17. He set it up in a hollow above the *qarargah* and loosed off several rounds. By the end of the afternoon we were all mightily impressed by Gul Haidar.[4]

A day or two after the Russians withdrew back down the valley, I met Massoud by chance in Sangana, where we had spent the night shortly before the start of Panjsher VI. After a brief chat, he asked, 'Have you time to discuss something with me privately?'

Rather taken aback, I said, 'Yes, of course. Now?'

'Not here,' he said. 'Go with this mujahid. He will take you to a house and I'll come later. If we are seen together people will talk.'

The mujahid, Tajuddin, smiled and signed to me to follow him. I thought Massoud's discretion rather strange, but presumed he had his reasons. We walked through the village, with its houses pleasantly shaded by the high canopy of walnut and mulberry trees, and turned in at the house of one of Massoud's friends. A few minutes later, Massoud arrived with the owner and sat down opposite me. It was the first time I had seen him sit in a chair. A huge tray of beautiful round red grapes was brought in and, although Massoud ate very sparingly, I had difficulty restraining myself as I waited expectantly to hear what he wanted to discuss.

'I want to ask you,' he began, 'how we can get help from the West, and if you think the Afghan resistance will be able to set up committees, like the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization], in the West?'

Taking the easier part of the question first, I said there were already a couple of committees in France and one in Britain – the Afghanistan Support Committee, a cross-party body of MPs founded by Robert Cran-borne, a Conservative peer who, because of the vagaries of British politics, sat in the House of Commons – which I was sure could be expanded. I saw no reason why

similar committees should not be set up in other countries, for example America. As for help from the West generally, I said Margaret Thatcher, President Reagan, and President Mitterrand of France all supported the Afghan resistance in the sense that they were all opposed to Soviet expansionism. I recalled Thatcher's vocal reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the initiative of Peter Carington, the foreign secretary, when he went to Moscow and tried to persuade the Russians to withdraw. When Carington made reference to the millions of people made refugees by the Soviet invasion, the veteran Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko is said to have replied, 'Ah, yes, the Afghans have always been a nomadic people.'

I went on, 'I don't know if the West is prepared to give the Afghan resistance military aid, but, if I were in your place, I would appeal directly. If you want to send a message to Mrs Thatcher, for example, I would be happy to take it for you and see it gets to her. Our film could also be very useful in putting your case to the outside world, and I am sure I can arrange for Mrs Thatcher to see it.'[5] (I knew Thatcher's Foreign Office adviser, Charles Powell, well.) He made no comment, and we then talked about Vietnam. At the time, I found his apparent lack of interest in contacting Thatcher distinctly odd, but, knowing what I know now – that Massoud had been secretly in touch with the British since sometime in 1980, two years earlier – his reaction becomes more understandable. I always found him very discreet about his relationship with the British – in fact, I can't remember him ever mentioning it – although his brother Yahya let slip one day that they had had several British 'visitors' to the Panjsher before ourselves. When I asked him who they were, he gave some evasive answer. Putting two and two together, I guessed they were British ex-SAS trainers, part of the aid progamme the British gave Massoud. MI6 policy was not to send serving SAS soldiers to Afghanistan in case they were killed or captured, whereas former SAS men were technically civilians.

I had asked Massoud earlier about aid from the West and he had replied, categorically, 'We are getting no help at all from the West.' I do not think Massoud, an honest man in my opinion, would have lied about this. Having 'found' Massoud in 1980, and decided he was the Afghan resistance leader they were going to support, why had it taken the British so long to provide him with help? I can only deduce that British bureaucracy had been bumbling along in

time-honoured slow motion (in the words of the seventeenth-century German poet Friedrich von Logau, ‘the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small’),[6] and that he had not received any of the high-tech radio equipment the British had promised him – having decided not to offer him arms – by the time we left the Panjsher in early October 1982. I heard later from a mujahideen source that radio equipment did arrive after our departure that autumn. Flatteringly, but possibly erroneously, the source was convinced that our film, seen by a prime-time television audience in Britain on 23 November 1982, had led to the arrival of the equipment, although it may have been pure coincidence. The source said that before the film was broadcast Massoud received little or no assistance, but after it was shown there was a lot of support.

Although I do not know the inside story of why it took so long before Massoud finally got his radio equipment, I know for sure he finally did get it. Four years later, in the summer of 1986, I filmed him sitting on a hilltop in Farkhar, northern Afghanistan, headphones clamped over his ears, his radio engineer beside him in a jacket emblazoned in large letters with the word RACAL – then the largest British radio equipment manufacturer. He was directing the battle to capture a Communist Afghan Army fort, issuing orders to his four commanders below, each of whom was equipped with a British-supplied walkie-talkie. At one point the air turned blue when Massoud, at full volume, demanded to know why one of his most dashing fighters, Commander Panna, was making such slow progress. It turned out that Panna had been held up by a minefield which even the defector who had briefed Massoud on every detail of the fort’s defences did not know about: the mines had been laid only a few days before, after the defector changed sides.

Massoud was much the most intelligent and militarily sophisticated of all the commanders I met on my travels with the mujahideen during the nine-year Soviet war of occupation. He quizzed me about Vietnam with a professional’s interest, and listened avidly while I described how the huge American B-52 bombers, flying at 40,000 feet, regularly dropped tons of high explosive on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, down which thousands of Vietcong guerrillas trekked with their weapons to fight in South Vietnam. When I recounted how my bedroom windows in the old French colonial hotel the Continental Palace in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) rattled at night during the B-52 strikes, which were taking

place only 10 or 15 miles away, he turned excitedly to the other Afghans in the room to translate, eyes gleaming.

He talked about his own situation, however, with an almost clinical detachment, saying he received very little aid from the outside and claiming the Pakistanis had stolen a lot of the weapons that were destined for him, substituting old rifles for new. ‘If we didn’t capture and buy a lot from the Russians, we would be extremely short,’ Massoud told me. ‘As it is, we’re so short of ammunition – we only have about fifty mortar rounds in the entire valley – that I can’t launch an attack on Rokha, as I’d like to.’

‘You say the Russians sell you arms?’ I asked in surprise.

‘Oh yes, the Afghans usually give them to us. But the Russians sell us Kalashnikovs, even Kalakovs, for money or for hashish.’

‘Do many of the Russian soldiers smoke hashish, then?’ I asked.

‘All of them,’ Massoud grinned. The parallel with the American GIs in Vietnam was striking.

I told him how the Vietnamese communists had received a steady flow of arms from Russia and China throughout the Vietnam War until, in the end, the North Vietnamese were better equipped than the South. He weighed every word.

I asked Massoud how he financed his war.

‘The money we receive from the sale of emeralds from [the mines at] Dasht-i-Rewat, at the head of the valley, is vital to our war effort,’ he said. The resistance was self-supporting in many ways. ‘But if the West were to help us, we would be able to conduct a much more effective war,’ he added. Again, taking into account what I know now, Western support for Massoud seems pathetically small. It would also seem that the American CIA short-changed Massoud, or allowed him to be short-changed by the ISI, which, under an arrangement with President Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan, distributed all the arms provided by the Americans. The ISI gave the vast majority to their favourite mujahideen leader, the Pashtun extremist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and next to nothing to Massoud, as Ambassador Peter Tomsen, former American envoy to the mujahideen, has recorded.[7] And Hekmatyar, it was often said, spent more time fighting other mujahideen leaders than the Russians, particularly his bête noire, Massoud.

So, Massoud was deliberately excluded from the American weapons chain by the Pakistani ISI, presumably with the knowledge of the CIA, for it seems hardly

credible that the CIA did not know who was getting what American-financed weaponry. Perhaps the CIA felt they could do nothing about it, despite Massoud's outstanding record of resistance to the Russians. And yet, as was pointed out by Robert Kaplan, the American journalist and writer who described Massoud as 'the Afghan who won the Cold War' in the *Wall Street Journal* on 5 May 1992, he still emerged on top.

A day or two later, Massoud unburdened himself to me with remarkable frankness. But first, he showed his humanity by discussing the plight of the Panjsher's refugees. They were a very big problem, he said. Assuming the total population of the Panjsher was about 80,000, more than half – 40,000 to 50,000 – were refugees, and many had lost their houses and belongings. The winter was going to be very bad. They would need help. In fact, if they had not had help already from neighbouring Andarab to the north, he doubted they would have survived. Then he said something that made me sit forward on the edge of my seat. 'If the Russian attacks go on like this, we'll have to change our tactics and conduct a more mobile war. As long as I am here, the Russians will continue to attack the Panjsher. So, next spring, I intend to leave the Panjsher and conduct a mobile war against the big Russian bases in the north and north-east. We will hit them hard in their bases. It will be a long war, but we will keep fighting.'

Later, Massoud explained that he intended to set up three new mobile groups, each of 150 men. Each group would have three platoons of thirty men, armed with Kalashnikovs, Kalakovs, light machine guns, and RPG-7 grenade launchers; a small headquarters unit; and a heavy weapons squad of fifty men, armed with mortars, artillery, heavy machine guns, and AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers.

'We have a lot of work to do this winter.'

He got up to go, but I had one more question: if he had the opportunity to make an appeal to the leaders of the West, what would he say?

He answered, 'The Russians are not interested in Afghanistan for itself; what they really want is what they have always wanted: a warm-water port in the Indian Ocean and control of the West's oil supply in the Gulf. So far, the West has stood idly by and done nothing to help the Afghans. All we have had from the West is words, not deeds.'

Massoud's bitterness was understandable. A less able mujahideen commander

would have probably gone under. That he not only survived but went from strength to strength was proof – if any were needed – that he was exceptional.

I had a last conversation with him before we started on the long journey home. He absolutely refused to let us use the same route as we came in on, saying it was now too dangerous because of the presence of Russian troops and hostile groups of Hekmatyar's fighters in the border area. Hekmatyar was in league with the Russians, he claimed, citing the incident during Panjsher VI in which Hisb-i-Islami villagers had – on Hekmatyar's orders, according to Massoud – evacuated their village without warning their neighbours in the nearby pro-Massoud village of Shawa, thus allowing Russian Spetsnaz to infiltrate the village and kill twenty of his mujahideen and their commander. We had been in the area at the time, and I remembered Yahya telling us how angry Massoud had been, giving his men a tongue-lashing after climbing up to the scene of the battle at night to take charge.

Conscious that this would be our last conversation together, I took the opportunity to ask Massoud how he had learned about guerrilla warfare. Massoud explained how his guerrilla movement was based on twenty *qarargahs* ('bases') in the Panjsher. Each *qarargah* had a group of about thirty mujahideen for self-defence, rather like a home guard, and another mobile group of thirty – a strike force that could operate anywhere inside or outside the Panjsher. Each *qarargah* had a council of ten elected villagers to advise the commander. The valley itself, he explained, was highly organised, with himself as overall military and political leader. Abdul Hai was his second-in-command, and below them were a number of departments, which sounded like embryonic ministries: military, economic, law, culture and information, political, health, intelligence, and Kabul affairs. The Kabul section was subdivided into military affairs (very important and top secret, Massoud said), student affairs, and propaganda – newspapers and leaflets. Kabul was also vital from an economic point of view, since he levied a war tax of 5 per cent on the earnings of all Panjsheris in the capital. Finally, Massoud said he had received no fresh supplies of arms or ammunition during the last offensive, Panjsher VI. All his resupply convoys had been blocked by Hekmatyar's forces.

Next day, we were up early, excited by the prospect of finally starting the long journey home. It was Tuesday, 28 September, our forty-ninth day in Afghanistan. Just before we boarded the lorry that was to take us up the valley to Dasht-i-

Rewat, I saw Massoud pacing up and down alone, deep in thought, and went to speak to him. I said I would report what was happening to the outside world, and he asked me if I would see President Zia in Pakistan. I said I would do my best to see him. ‘Should I tell him how the Pakistanis were stealing your new weapons and substituting old ones?’ Without hesitation, Massoud nodded. ‘Yes, tell him.’ Unfortunately, I failed to see Zia; he was in China.

6

The Russians Propose a Ceasefire

The story of how the Russians came to propose a ceasefire to their bitter foe Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Lion of the Panjsher, reads almost like a thriller.[1] One day in 1982, two and a half years after the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, a Soviet military intelligence officer from the Glavnoe Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie (GRU, translated as the 'Main Intelligence Directorate') happened to meet a middle-aged Panjsheri communist called Mirdad. They became friends, and one day Mirdad said something that seems to have struck a chord with the man from the GRU.

Mirdad, a party apparatchik and senior official at the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture, where his expertise was in seeds, had been sent to the Panjsher with a group of about 100 other government officials on a propaganda mission. Their brief was to persuade the Panjsheris to side with the government, and to encourage them to do so by distributing money and food. Mirdad was worried at being given such a mission: 'I knew only my profession and the basics of war and my rifle. I did not know much else.'[2] So, he went to see the minister of education, another Panjsheri, called Dastagir, who told him that since he was 'an older and sociable' person and 'could help people', he should go; in any case, he had no option, because the decision came from the Revolutionary Council of Afghanistan's communist party.

Mirdad and the rest of his group were flown by helicopter to the Russian base at Anaba, the first sizeable village as you drive up the Panjsher Valley. It was the summer of 1982 and Mirdad recalled that, unlike civilians in other parts of the valley, who had sought refuge in the mountains, people in Anaba were living in

their homes. During the four and a half months he spent in Anaba, he was invited occasionally to the Soviet garrison's private quarters, where he met an officer he calls 'General' Anatoli, but who was in fact Colonel Anatoli Tkachev, usually known as Anatoli, a member of the GRU whom Mirdad described as tall, well-mannered, and pleasant. As befitted his intelligence role, Anatoli never wore uniform, always civvies. He and Mirdad communicated in English, and 'very quickly became friends', the Afghan said. Anatoli sometimes even talked politics, whereas Mirdad was cautious and avoided 'potentially harmful political discussions'.

Anatoli had volunteered for service in Afghanistan in 1981, partly, he said, because of his journalistic and intelligence background, and partly because of the inaccurate picture in the Soviet media of what was happening in Afghanistan: 'Our media were reporting that the Afghan people were living a normal and peaceful life and our troops were engaged in military manoeuvres.'[3] The West on the other hand was reporting that a genuine war was in progress, and that the Soviet population had no information about it. Anatoli said he did not volunteer in order to fight: 'I never took a weapon in my hand and never took part in any war and did not even allow my interpreter to carry a weapon. As a journalist and director of intelligence I wanted to know what was going on there.'

Within three months of arriving in Afghanistan, Anatoli said that he saw what was really happening. 'I will never forget the sight of the bodies of civilians killed by the bombing of our planes in Kunduz,' he said, referring to a city in northern Afghanistan. He considered himself lucky to have been posted to the main Russian base at Anaba in the Panjsher, because if he had been sent to Kunduz or anywhere else, he would have become involved with 'other work' and not with the ceasefire:

> When I arrived in Anaba in the Panjsher, in May 1982, there was not a single undamaged house in the whole village. I did not see any people, not even a dog. Our military personnel said they had liberated the Panjsher and enabled the inhabitants to live their lives in peace. But when I saw the Panjsher, the reality was very different. They had 'liberated' the Panjsher from its civilian inhabitants, but not from its fighters. The rule of the people was only practised in the garrisons. Our army's advance to Bazarak [18 miles up the valley] took three days, but withdrawing took twenty-five, including the abandonment of the two garrisons at Rokha and Anaba. What purpose they had in abandoning these two garrisons I cannot comprehend.
>
> I was doing my duty. This was the situation when I began my service there. As I said before, there

were no people living in the area, but gradually they began to drift back from the mountains and the towns.

This was when I got to know Mirdad and we became friends. We used to sit and have tea together and discuss the situation in Afghanistan. I was always interested to do this because there were many questions in my mind that I wanted to find answers to. The return of the inhabitants of Anaba made me wonder what to do with these people. I wanted to show that by having contact and dialogue with them it was possible to secure peace. Why Panjsher? Because it was at that time the 'hottest spot' in Afghanistan.[4]

One day, when they were talking, the two men saw large convoys of Russian military hardware driving into the valley. Mirdad said Anatoli 'turned towards me with a smile and told me how powerful the Russian army was'. Uncharacteristically outspoken for once, Mirdad replied, 'Even if this army were to become a thousand times stronger it would not be able to reduce these high mountains by one centimetre.' Anatoli smiled but said nothing.[5] Next day, however, when they saw one another, Anatoli said he had been thinking about what Mirdad said the day before, and asked him what he had been trying to say. Mirdad later recounted:

I told him that resistance to their army was resistance by the people and that the people are like the mountain; and there should be another way [of doing things] rather than by force. He said nothing. But what I said became like a mantra to him. Whenever there was something happening, a battle or resistance was taking place, he was saying that I was right and that the mountain top was always difficult to conquer.[6]

Mirdad added that on the day he made his remark he had no hint of a solution in his mind. It was his subconscious that was deeply affected by 'seeing so much war and killing' in the past few days. They had often seen wounded and dead Russian soldiers being transported down the valley, he said, and 'the war was still continuing in the valley'.

Anatoli had his own misgivings, as he saw intelligence reports were being distorted as they were passed up the chain of command:

No one wanted to take responsibility and report the true state of affairs, and the top military leadership did not want to believe reliable intelligence. A formal instruction was given to reflect in the reports positive trends that were virtually non-existent. Wishful thinking was valid. Meanwhile, the bodies of our soldiers and officers were being steadily taken out of the Panjsher. But this did not really bother our leaders.[7]

One important source in the tangled skein of Massoud's relations with the Soviets, Rodric Braithwaite, the former British ambassador to Moscow, said that Anatoli offered a suggestion when reporting on the situation to General Akhromeev, who at that time was still a member of the Ministry of Defence's Operational Group in Kabul:

> I told him that we ought to try to reach an agreement with Ahmad Shah [Massoud] on a ceasefire since the civilian population was being killed by artillery and air strikes, and soldiers were being killed by the mujahideen. He answered that all those old men, women and children were relatives of the rebels and as for the deaths of our soldiers, they were only doing their duty. If one was killed, ten more could be sent to take his place. Ahmad Shah [Massoud] should be brought to his knees and made to lay down his weapons.[8]

When Anatoli went on leave to Moscow, he shared his thoughts with his superior officer, General Piotr Ivashutin, the head of military intelligence at the Ministry of Defence, who authorised the plan. Other high-level officials approved it. Although Anatoli did not know it at the time, both the commander-in-chief of the army, Nikolai Ogarkov, and even more importantly, the minister of defence, Dmitri Ustinov, 'were aware of these developments and were following them with interest'.[9] The plan was also supported by Akhromeev's superior, Marshal Sergei Sokolov. Even as the Soviets were pursuing their fifth and sixth offensives in the Panjsher, their largest operations to date, Anatoli was absorbed with developing his idea of a ceasefire. The whole of 1982 was taken up by 'the preparation of this idea', he said.

For Mirdad, who had no idea of the divisions within the Soviet leadership, the idea was fraught with danger: 'One day Anatoli came to see me and invited me to tea. I could see that he had something important to tell me. While we were drinking our tea, he looked me straight in the eye and said, "Our leader is dead." I asked him what he meant. He said he meant Brezhnev was dead.'[10] The news had not been announced yet by the official media. 'I was astonished by his show of happiness, and did not believe it, and said that it was not good that a leader of communism should have passed away, or something of that sort. Seeing my confusion, he smiled and said, "Don't worry, and trust me. Actually it is good that this happened, as our friends, led by Mr Andropov, will now be in power."'

When Yuri Andropov, previously head of the KGB, succeeded Leonid Brezhnev as Soviet Communist Party leader, Anatoli was recalled to Moscow

and Mirdad returned to his job in the Ministry of Agriculture in Kabul. It was not until the end of that year, 1982, that Anatoli returned to Kabul and came to see Mirdad with several colleagues, in an official car with diplomatic corps (CD) plates. After the usual greetings, Mirdad said, Anatoli told him he had been personally appointed by Andropov, and his colleagues were all from Andropov's office: 'With the appointment of Mr Andropov, changes are underway in Russia; among them is to find a solution to the withdrawal of Russian troops from Afghanistan.' They and Mirdad, Anatoli said, would work together on this issue. 'I remember your statement,' Mirdad recalled Anatoli saying, '"Things cannot be achieved by force." It is now time to work for peace.'[11]

The Russians had decided the first step was to negotiate peace with the main mujahideen commanders in Afghanistan. Ceasefires would be established in the areas under their control, and the Russians would gradually withdraw. Mirdad said he had several questions, such as 'Why is this starting in the Panjsher?', to which Anatoli replied, 'Because it's in the Panjsher and the Salang that most of the fighting takes place, and most of our losses are incurred in these areas.'

The Panjsher lay near the most important route in Afghanistan, the Salang Tunnel and highway, with the heaviest traffic carrying Russian supplies from the Soviet border to Bagram Air Base and Kabul. Another reason Anatoli gave was that the mujahideen forces under the command of Massoud were better organised and better disciplined than others, so that if a ceasefire were agreed, one could trust them to observe it. 'In other parts of Afghanistan there are not so many fighters under one commander, and if ceasefires were agreed with other commanders, one could not be sure that if one of them disagreed, the ceasefire would be maintained,' he told Mirdad. 'As for the choice of you, Mirdad, to work with us, since the programme is going to start in the Panjsher and you are from there, and also as I have no other good friend in the Panjsher that I can trust, I am asking you to cooperate with us.'

This discussion went on for several days, Mirdad recalled: 'In my mind there were many questions, such as whether the Russians really had decided to leave Afghanistan; how they wanted to leave. Where would the Afghan forces go? What would the mujahideen do? What would the future government be like? And who will lead it? And dozens more questions,' Mirdad recalled. 'Anatoli, who was watching me, asked, "Is it hard for you to make a decision? Please find

someone to take our message to Massoud. After finding this person, you will have done your duty." From the assurances that Anatoli gave me, I half-believed that the Russians would leave Afghanistan. I asked for two weeks to make the arrangements.'[12]

Mirdad's biggest difficulty was that he did not know Massoud, although he had met his father and been to their house. Massoud had been very young then, and Mirdad could not even remember what he had looked like. After a few days thinking about who could take the message to him, Mirdad consulted his 'very good friend' Daoud, who was a relative of Massoud's and also an officer in the now-communist-controlled Afghan army. After swearing him to secrecy, Mirdad explained the mission, and Daoud 'gladly accepted'. He said it was an easy task and that he could do it himself: 'It's easy to go and come from the Panjsher; you needn't worry.'

Anatoli, who had been alerted by Mirdad to come to his office with the rest of his committee, impressed the sensitivity of the mission on Daoud, insisting the letter must be handed to Massoud only, and that no one in the government must know about it. That afternoon, Anatoli returned with the letter, and once again stressed that the letter must be handed over to Massoud in person. After Anatoli had left, Mirdad asked Daoud what his plan of campaign was. Having seen how cautious Anatoli's approach was, Daoud must have realised how important the mission was, as he proposed to go first without the letter to visit the mujahideen area and see what conditions were like, on the roads and in general. Then, on the second trip, he would take the letter. Mirdad agreed with his cautious approach, and Daoud left next day.

Mirdad said he was 'very worried' the whole time Daoud was away. He also had a 'new worry' – that there might be something in the letter that would be harmful to Massoud. Mirdad asked Anatoli if it would be possible for him to open the letter in front of Daoud and himself. He did not want to know the contents but did want to be sure it was a proper letter. Anatoli said he completely agreed. Mirdad gave the letter back and waited for Daoud to return. Finally, after several weeks, Daoud reappeared, saying he was ready to complete the mission. Mirdad informed Anatoli, who came, opened the envelope, and placed the letter inside it in their presence, as promised. Mirdad later admitted that, while all this was going on, worrying thoughts were 'revolving' in his head as if he were going

to deliver the letter himself. Being reminded by Anatoli of the importance of not letting the letter fall into the hands of the government or the Khadamat-e Etelaat Dawlati (KHAD, the Afghan communist secret police) simply added to the burden on his shoulders. ‘My concern was not unreasonable,’ Mirdad said. ‘When they arrested me later, they questioned me endlessly about the letter.’ Mirdad and his family were in fact arrested by the Afghan communist government in 1984. The family was later released, but Mirdad was jailed for seven years for his role as mediator in the ceasefire.

‘I was saying goodbye to Anatoli when a new concern troubled me. This time it was about Daoud’s security in the Panjsher. I told him I had a suggestion: that while Daoud was in the Panjsher the Russians should not attack the valley, otherwise there was no guarantee that Daoud would reach Massoud in good health.’ After a brief moment of reflection, Anatoli said he agreed, and that he would make sure this happened.

Daoud was gone for twenty-eight days, returning all in one piece and with a reply from Massoud. The only thing that upset Mirdad was Daoud’s admission that he had received help from a friend and fellow Panjsheri called Guldad. This annoyed Mirdad, since he had given Daoud strict instructions not to tell anyone what he was doing. But Daoud said, ‘Don’t worry, he doesn’t know the real reason for my visit; he’s a close friend, and without him I would have found it virtually impossible to find my way over the mountain passes to Massoud.’ When Mirdad told Anatoli that Daoud was back, he and his staff came ‘very quickly’. Anatoli was happy that Massoud had given a positive answer, and said, ‘Now we have to take the second step,’ the choice of a meeting place. Mirdad recalled, ‘He then turned to me and said, “Your friend Daoud should take the second message to Massoud,” and I reminded him of his promise that when I had completed my side of the bargain, he would make any further arrangements with Daoud himself. Anatoli was not pleased to have to let me go but he honoured his promise and agreed I would no longer be involved.’

A few days later, Anatoli came to see Mirdad again and, after sitting chatting amicably for a few minutes, said, ‘I have good news. Ahmad Shah Massoud has asked to see you, and you should get ready to go.’

‘My whole body went numb,’ Mirdad recalled. He asked why Massoud should want to see him. Anatoli said he did not know precisely, but imagined that before

Massoud and he met, Massoud would like to know more about the people involved – ‘about us and about our programmes’. He also revealed that Massoud had not agreed to the suggested meeting place. In the end, because of Anatoli’s insistence and despite his own concerns, Mirdad reluctantly agreed to go.

A day or two later, he and Anatoli flew to the Panjsher by helicopter. Both Daoud and Guldad were waiting for them in Rokha, the principal village of the Panjsher, where the Russians also had a base. After dinner, they set off walking in the direction of the rendezvous, using torches to signal their progress. After about half an hour, they saw someone coming to meet them, and soon afterwards they met and shook hands. Mirdad recognised Kaka Tajuddin, Massoud’s right-hand man, who was ‘very pleasant and forthcoming’.[13] The chosen meeting place was the village of Belandak, about 3 miles from Bazarak. They walked more or less in silence, noticing that along the whole route they had mujahideen protection, both in front and behind. Even on this walk, Mirdad said, he was still thoughtful and worried: ‘If the truth be told, I was a bit fearful. We were going towards the enemy area. Perhaps we did not consider them as the enemy, but I’m sure they considered us as the enemy … In an environment of blood and fire, animosity, grudge, and hatred, we were going into enemy territory on our own two feet. Who wouldn’t be worried?’

They finally came to the house of Mohammad Ghous, later Massoud’s driver. Mirdad and his companions were familiar with the place and the village, as it was next door to their own village. ‘We were supposed to meet Massoud that night and leave before daybreak, but he did not appear either that night or the next night,’ he recalled. ‘Kaka Tajuddin made his apologies, saying Massoud was “busy” but would meet us on the third night.’ Mirdad said they spent the day ‘waiting and worrying’, and finally, in the evening, Massoud appeared.

‘He was not at all as I had imagined him,’ Mirdad said. He had had no time to ask Daoud and Guldad about Massoud’s appearance, but he had visualised ‘a tall man, with a thick beard, dark-skinned and hard, serious features. In fact, I was looking at a totally different person: a man of medium height, with an average beard, a slightly larger than usual head, a wide forehead above large eyes, an open face and white skin. He greeted us in an open, friendly manner, which created a feeling of confidence and trust at our first encounter. His opening words were of apology to have kept us waiting and he asked if the walk had not

tired us.' To this Mirdad replied, 'It was not that difficult.'

After dinner, Massoud asked why the Russians wanted negotiations, who their negotiators were, and to which branch of the army they belonged. He also wanted to know Mirdad's background, how he came to know Anatoli, and his personal opinion of the Russians' intentions. Finally, Massoud said he would not agree to meet the Russians in an area under their control or anywhere between the two front lines. 'As we did not propose the meeting and they did,' Massoud said, 'please tell them to come to a place of our choosing.' He believed that the Russians could do so confidently, in the knowledge that there would be no threat to their lives. After the meeting, he bade Mirdad a friendly farewell, and Mirdad left for Rokha, where Anatoli and his colleagues were waiting.

As soon as he got back, Mirdad briefed Anatoli, who took the view that they should not show a lack of confidence in Massoud and that the talks should be started 'with confidence and trust'. Other members of his delegation, however, were more cautious, and argued the meeting should be held somewhere between the two front lines. This resulted in Mirdad having to make another visit to Massoud, who refused to change his mind and said if they did not agree with his conditions, then 'we do not need this negotiation'. Mirdad returned with the ultimatum and, after 'intensive discussions', it was agreed that Mirdad and Daoud would accompany Anatoli and an interpreter, Amir Mohammad Samarqandi, to talk to Massoud. Next night, they retraced their steps with the GRU officer and his interpreter.

7

Massoud Deals with the Russians

The meeting was set for New Year's Eve 1982, at night and in mujahideen territory in the heart of the Panjsher Valley. In a BTR, with its driver and commander, Anatoli and his small team of Afghans set off through the freezing dark, taking care not to give themselves away as they passed Afghan army positions near their own at Rokha. The BTR dropped them off and turned back.

Anatoli had managed to arrange a ban of the usual Soviet celebratory fire over the period of the New Year, and the night was quiet. From here, Anatoli was walking unarmed, without any compatriots or security, into enemy territory. He was relying on one thing, gleaned from his many conversations with Panjsheris in Kabul – including the three government officials Mirdad, Daoud, and Dastagir, who, he said, gave sometimes contradictory views of Massoud, and sometimes good and bad combined. 'However,' Anatoli said, 'everyone said that he was a man of his word. This gave [me] hope of returning alive after meeting him, as he guaranteed our safety.'[1]

The accounts of the meeting from Mirdad and Anatoli himself are similar, with a few minor variations. Anatoli's account, for example – recorded by the Russian military historian Alexander Lyakhovsky – has the colonel reporting that he fired a rocket, 'the agreed signal', to mark his arrival at the meeting place.[2] Mirdad, meanwhile, described them signalling with torches.

Arriving at the first rendezvous, Anatoli and his companions were met by Massoud's faithful man Friday, Tajuddin, and they started walking towards the meeting place, which took several hours. Tajuddin took good care of him, Anatoli reported, stopping periodically to let him rest. As they neared their

destination, Anatoli described that he had only one worry, which he confessed later both to Marshal Sokolov and to the commander-in-chief of the 40th Army in Afghanistan: that Massoud would not come to the meeting himself, but send a substitute. He had never seen a photograph of Massoud, so he had no idea what he looked like.

It was midnight when they arrived at their destination, the village of Bazarak, where they stayed in the only house still standing among several that had been destroyed by bombing. Inside, to their surprise, 'Everything was clean and tidy – the floor, all the dishes and cooking utensils, the quilts and cushions.'[3] They had a rest and drank tea. Tajuddin told them that the meeting had been delayed, and Massoud was asking if they could postpone the meeting until 9:30 a.m. the next day, to which Anatoli agreed. He slept well. Next morning, he wondered how he would greet Massoud, 'whether as two strangers, dry and formal, or like Afghans'. He chose the latter.

Anatoli's account from the Russian archives reads: 'Exactly at 9:30 the following morning Massoud came into the room. Contrary to what I had expected, he was a handsome person, of middle height, glowing skin and very polite.' Massoud was 'dressed in traditional Afghan costume and the expression on his face was of concentration and openness: quite unlike the picture painted by our propaganda.'[4] Anatoli said the tension lasted only seconds, and he did not see in Massoud 'the sinister face of an implacable enemy', but eyes that 'shone with good nature and goodwill'. 'Apparently,' he recalled, 'there was no hostility on our faces either … We greeted one another, Afghan style, and sat down.' In his account, Massoud described Anatoli as 'a tall, slim, and agreeable person'. He shook his hand, greeted him, and said, 'You are very welcome in our place.'

Anatoli continued, 'His first question was about my trip and how I was feeling after the long walk to the meeting place. Was I tired? All of this made a pleasant atmosphere for a negotiation. I learned this from Massoud[5] … We exchanged traditional greetings and general conversation in the best Afghan style for about half an hour. Then we were left in the room alone. Massoud suggested we get down to business.'[6]

Massoud recalled telling Anatoli, 'You know we are here for a negotiation and I want to hear from you first.'[7] Three years into the war against the Soviet army, Massoud had been through his most punishing year of fighting yet, and was

beset by problems when he received the Russian offer of talks – as he said in his own account of the ceasefire negotiations, which he recorded on tape in Dushanbe in December 2000 with the help of his former military attaché General Saleh Registani. He had survived two massive Russian offensives, Panjsher V and VI, which had followed one after the other without reprieve, and had succeeded in pushing back the Afghan and Russian forces, but his men, and the civilian population in particular, had suffered terribly, as my crew and I had seen for ourselves earlier that year.

Massoud recounted that he had been prepared for an attack on the lower end of the valley, but the Russians had surprised him by airlifting troops up the valley, circumventing his prepared defences, and they had made new and extensive use of helicopters as well as aerial bombing in the battles. The Afghan army, backed by the Russians, had established three garrisons in the central part of the Panjsher, which became the focus of fierce fighting. Massoud's fighters seized control of one garrison, at a place called Berchnam, and killed most of the government soldiers. 'Over 90 per cent of them were killed,' he recalled. 'Hundreds were taken prisoner. Many soldiers threw themselves into the river to escape but they were drowned … It was strange that the Russian army did not help them or could not help them.'[8] By the end of the summer, the Russians and their Afghan allies had abandoned the garrisons and pulled back to the lower part of the valley at Rokha and Anaba, where Massoud continued harassing them, sending raiding parties through the river at night.

Yet his men were desperately short of ammunition, and were forced to recycle old and rusty bullets left behind by the Soviets. Massoud said that the mujahideen were so lacking in footwear that a man on lookout, watching the Russian bases, would hand over his boots to the next man replacing him. He estimated 100 men had lost legs on mines laid by the Russians, and said some had died from their injuries for lack of immediate medical care. By the onset of winter, food was scarce. Fighters on the front lines 'were given just a few dried mulberries and a few pieces of potato,' Massoud recalled. 'We lacked oil, sugar, and wheat.' Money was the greatest problem. Massoud relied on the population for support. Individuals donated money for the war effort, and his men relied on their families for food and clothing, but the war had prevented farming and decimated livelihoods. People were sheltering in caves or, increasingly, were

being forced to migrate out of the valley, which was depleting the resistance.

Leaving aside the brutality of the war, what emerged also from Massoud's account was that Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a bitter rival, was using his mujahideen to fight not the Russians but Massoud. Hekmatyar instructed his commanders to attack Massoud and block his supply routes in the Andarab Valley, to the immediate north of the Panjsher, and to the east from Pakistan – although they sometimes ignored his orders. In his methodical way, Massoud listed his problems: 'The prolongation of the war, the difficult economic situation, the lack of attention' – read 'assistance' – 'from mujahideen leaders in Peshawar, the acute shortage of ammunition, the blockading of their supply routes by rival commanders, and the forced exodus of the local population were always on my mind. I was desperately seeking a way of escape from these problems.'

It was November, after the death of the Soviet leader, Brezhnev, when Daoud, whom Massoud had not seen for years, arrived at Massoud's base in the Panjsher Valley. 'I have an important message for you,' Daoud said. 'OK, we'll meet tonight,' Massoud replied. All meetings were held at night because heavy Russian bombing made it unsafe to use a house during the day.

Daoud handed over Anatoli's offer of talks. Massoud described it as a letter from the chief of staff of the 40th Army, the Russian occupation force in Afghanistan. It was concise and to the point: 'The conflict in the Panjsher Valley is benefiting neither you nor us. In order to stop this bloodshed we are ready to sit and negotiate with you.'[9] Although the wording Anatoli mentioned in his account was different, both versions mention negotiation, Registani points out. Massoud's answer was that he would consult 'the people and my commanders' and respond in a week's time.

In his recorded statement – which his son Ahmad told me was Massoud's rebuttal of all the criticism he received, even from people like Rabbani, for making the ceasefire agreement – Massoud explained that the strategic position of the Panjsher Valley, close to the Salang Tunnel and the main road from Mazar-i-Sharif to Kabul and Bagram Air Base, was a major target for the Soviets.[10] To offset the continual threat of attack on the Panjsher – which he said persisted for virtually the whole of 1982 – Massoud argued that the guerrilla war had to be expanded by opening more 'battlefronts' in different parts of the country.

This led Massoud to approach two other major commanders: Zabiullah in Mazar-i-Sharif and Ismail Tariq in Laghman, each of whom would be in charge of mujahideen 'battlefronts' in a third of the country. Zabiullah would 'organise the battlefronts' of the north, from Termez, on the northern border with Uzbekistan, as far south as Mazar-i-Sharif and the Salang Tunnel; Ismail Tariq would be responsible for the southern third of the area, from the Pakistan border at Torkham to Kabul; and Massoud would continue his operations in the centre, from the Salang Tunnel south to Kabul, including the Panjsher. It is not clear if this ambitious and typically bold 'Massoudian' idea ever materialised – probably not, since both commanders, Zabiullah and Tariq, were later assassinated by Hekmatyar's Hisb-i-Islami – but Massoud spent most of the year of the ceasefire period outside the Panjsher, establishing bases in the north.

Apart from escaping the punishing and potentially fatal ordeal of almost daily aerial bombardment, Massoud saw the Russian ceasefire proposal as offering a 'golden opportunity' to achieve his military ambitions, which were to expand his organisation into the north, and in so doing to create a more effective military alliance, according to Registani.[11] This led in fact to the formation of the Shura-i-Nazar, or Supervisory Council of the North and eventually the Northern Alliance, as it came to be known among English-speakers, amalgamating his own Tajiks with well-disciplined Uzbek and other minority troops in what Massoud saw as the forerunner of a national army. But first, he consulted the people of the Panjsher – the clergy, the elders, and his mujahideen commanders.

The first speaker at the meeting Massoud convened to discuss the Russian proposal was a prominent Panjsheri cleric, Maulvi (a title meaning 'religious scholar') Mohammad Wazir, who told the assembled audience:

> We all know we need a better and more sophisticated preparation for the continuation of the jihad and this is an excellent opportunity for us. This ceasefire will give us the time and opportunity to face the enemy better prepared next time. Therefore, from the Islamic point of view, there is no objection. But I also see it as being comparable to the peace treaty of Hudaibiya, the peace treaty which enabled the Prophet Mohammad to conquer Mecca.[12]

All the other religious scholars present agreed with him, as did Massoud's mujahideen commanders and the rest of the attendees. 'Everyone agreed we should start the dialogue with the Soviets so that we [could] benefit from this

opportunity to re-equip ourselves,' Massoud recalled.[13]

Massoud was always thinking of how he could expand mujahideen control to other regions, especially to areas where there was no Soviet presence. One day, he had been sitting on a hilltop near his house in the village of Jangalak, a mile or two upriver from Bazarak, watching fighting in the distance. He recalled:

> The battle was extremely intense, with enormous clouds of smoke and fire rising above the valley. I watched hundreds of houses being destroyed. What bothered me most at the time was the fact that I was unable to open more battlefronts like Panjsher in other parts of the country, to expand the number of battlefronts so that, if one was under pressure, we would be able to move the civilians and the fighters to other bases.[14]

Massoud had 'strongly disagreed' with the Russian suggestion to hold the talks in an area controlled by them and had rejected their second proposal of a place somewhere between their respective front lines. When the Russians then asked what guarantee of safety they would have if they met in mujahideen territory, Massoud cited 'our verbal promise' as well as the credibility of his forces and of himself as a battlefront commander. He insisted that only 'one unarmed person' come as negotiator, but he agreed when Anatoli proposed bringing an interpreter.[15]

In his account, cited by Russian researchers, Anatoli related that the meeting began with the two men discussing 'the history of friendly and traditionally good neighbourly relations' between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union:

> Massoud said sadly, 'What a great pity that your forces invaded Afghanistan. The leaders of both countries made the greatest possible mistake. You could call it a crime against the Afghan and Soviet peoples.' When we made the points which had been laid down by our superiors, he was a bit surprised that there were no ultimatums, no demands for capitulation.[16]

Anatoli went on to explain, 'Our central proposal was for a mutual cease-fire in Panjsher and common measures to enable the local population to lead a normal life.'[17]

The two men debated for most of the day, occasionally breaking for some fresh air. Massoud showed no hostility toward the Soviet Union and Soviet people and expressed hope that after the war the two countries would remain good neighbours, Anatoli said. 'But as for the Kabul regime, he was and would

remain their implacable opponent: once the Soviet forces had left, they would have no future.'

In Massoud's account of the meeting, Anatoli was extremely critical of the war and of the Afghan government led by the communist party's chief, Babrak Karmal. He recalled Anatoli saying:

> This war is not a just war, [it is] one from which neither the Soviet Union nor Afghanistan is benefiting. It was started for the wrong reasons. We thought that Americans and other Westerners were here, but we did not see a single one. It is all Afghans who are opposing us. We are fighting people like farmers and labourers. This war must stop. We are supporting a bunch of traitors who have no place in the hearts and minds of Afghan people. As I see it, non-Muslims have no right to govern Afghanistan. Therefore I believe that Babrak Karmal and his colleagues have no right to rule the Afghans. They are traitors and selling out their country … There has been a lot of fighting in the Panjsher recently and both sides have suffered. Now is the time to bring this bloodshed to an end.[18]

Massoud also commented:

> I realised that Soviet casualties were much higher than we had thought and that they were under incredible pressure from our mujahideen in the Panjsher. In the first meeting I showed interest only in the continuation of the dialogue. There was no agenda for negotiations nor any mention of a ceasefire. We agreed that each side would go away and think about the agenda and discuss it at the next meeting.

At the end of the meeting, while he was getting ready to leave, Anatoli said, 'What if you stop firing at the Rokha garrison and avoid further operations, because they will cost the lives of many on both sides?'

Massoud replied, 'That's fine, I agree, but your side has to stop their bombardment and other operations as well, and keep in mind that this is an informal ceasefire until we see what happens at the next meetings.' On that encouraging note, Anatoli took his leave.

To show he meant business, Massoud acted immediately: 'I ordered our forces to stop all their attacks until they received the next order. Although the ceasefire agreement had not been formally signed, we observed a cease-fire and did not attack them.' However, Massoud said, the Soviets had a problem with the Afghan government, which did not know about the ceasefire and was worried by the fact that the Soviets were not fighting the mujahideen:

> As a result, the Afghan army violated the ceasefire several times. For instance, they bombarded our

> positions in the Panjsher a couple of times and the Soviets apologised and said the Afghans had told them they were bombarding elsewhere but instead they hit the Panjsher. In fact, both [Babrak] Karmal and Najib [Mohammad Najibullah, known as Dr Najib, the head of KHAD] strongly opposed the ceasefire plan and wanted the Soviets to fight and inflict casualties on us. They, Karmal and Najib, did not care about Soviet casualties; their only dream was our defeat.

Massoud used the breathing space until the return of the Soviet negotiators to tackle one of his most pressing problems. 'We did not rest, immediately disarming Hisb-i-Islami,' he wrote, describing the organisation's presence in Pushghur – a part of the Panjsher – as a 'cancer'. Hisb-i-Islami consistently blocked attempts by Massoud's people to buy supplies in Andarab, the valley immediately to the north of the Panjsher. The next time Massoud met Anatoli, the Russian said, 'You're using these opportunities to eradicate Hisb-i-Islami in Pushghur,' to which Massoud replied, 'This is an internal matter and has nothing to do with the ceasefire.'[19]

Anatoli did not pursue the subject. His account matches that of Massoud:

> During this period, there were no attacks on our forces from Massoud's side, but [the ceasefire] was broken a few times by our side. Once I was with Massoud when our air force bombed some parts of the Panjsher, which made Massoud very angry. He said, 'If you don't believe me you can visit the place which was bombed by your planes.' But I knew Massoud was right. Our people said it was a mistake.[20]

After that, more restrictions were imposed on the Soviet Air Forces. 'This did not suit the Kabul regime, which continually insisted that the Soviet military should take offensive action against Massoud,' Anatoli explained.[21] During one of his subsequent meetings with Massoud, they heard the sound of helicopters approaching. 'I said to Massoud that as there was a ceasefire we need not worry about the helicopters, but he said that we should go to the shelter just in case. We had barely done that when the helicopters struck the house and half of it was destroyed. Massoud pointed to the ruins and said, "International assistance in action."' The next day, Anatoli was shown an Afghan government intelligence report which said that there had been a strike the previous day at 1 p.m. on a *kishlaq* [a summer encampment used by herders] where Massoud and a number of other rebel leaders had been meeting. The document reported that all of them had been killed, and Massoud's arms had been torn off and his skull split. 'I said

that I had been drinking tea with Massoud six hours after the alleged strike,' Anatoli recalled, 'so I must have been drinking with a corpse.'

Throughout the negotiations, Anatoli was fending off the hawks on his own side. Some strange suggestions were made within the Soviet camp in the course of the negotiations, caused by 'our ignorance of the area and of Massoud himself', Anatoli said:

> There were suggestions that Massoud should be offered a position in the Karmal regime. I told them that even to propose such an idea was wrong. Or to propose that he should lay down his arms. I said, 'How can you ask someone who has not been defeated to lay down his arms? Or even suggest it?' Do you realise they did not even understand this simple principle? Were we there to establish people's well-being in the area? I well remember Pavel Grachev, later [Russia's] minister of defence, telling a meeting in Anaba, 'We are giving you land.' I read in the eyes of the people present that they were asking themselves, 'What is this? Are they giving us our own land?'[22]

When the second round of negotiations started, Massoud began by proposing that 'since both sides want to prevent bloodshed it is logical that your troops should leave the Panjsher'. The Russians refused to accept this suggestion, saying, 'We will not leave the Panjsher, but we are ready to reduce the number of our forces step by step. First we will decrease the number of our troops in the Rokha base and you can tell your people to return to their homes and resume their normal lives.'

Massoud replied, 'You have occupied their homes and lands; how can they return to them?' The argument continued for hours, and Massoud repeatedly insisted on Russia's complete withdrawal. He recalled:

> One of our secret agents, Agha Sahib, who was part of the Soviet negotiating team,[23] who had given us precise information about Soviet plans, told me before our second meeting that the Soviets were under a lot of pressure in Rokha and that if we were to insist on their full withdrawal from there, they might just accept it. They had no intention, however, of leaving Anaba [the main Soviet base in the Panjsher, near the entrance to the valley], so [he told me not to] bother insisting on that because it is a waste of time. They won't leave Anaba under any circumstances. In the event it turned out to be exactly as Agha Sahib had predicted.[24]

Massoud went on:

> Anatoli told us, 'We will withdraw our forces from Rokha so that people can return to their homes, but in Anaba we are not occupying people's houses and land, they're already living in their own houses, so we're not going to leave Anaba.' Anatoli was right. The inhabitants of Anaba, unlike in

other places, were not displaced and the Soviets were based in the lower parts of the mountains.[25]

Eventually, after a long discussion with Anatoli, Massoud agreed to the following draft decisions:

> Soviet forces are to retreat from Rokha to Anaba.
>
> Only one Afghan and one Soviet battalion are to remain in Anaba. The two battalions should have the usual amount of arms and equipment.
>
> Their military control posts should not be sited on mountaintops.
>
> Afghan and Soviet units are not allowed to enter the residential and bazaar areas.[26]

Anatoli voiced an objection at this point, arguing that Daoud, as liaison officer, should have a base in the Anaba bazaar area. Massoud agreed:

> Soviet and Afghan supply convoys must have [the resistance's] permission to enter Panjsher but are not allowed to supply or carry weapons. The mujahideen have the right to search their supply convoys.
>
> Air supply must be pre-arranged. No weapons are allowed. [Resistance] forces will be monitoring the situation in Anaba.[27]

The second step was to draw a map of the area to be covered by the cease-fire. Massoud recalled:

> At this point, I was very careful as I wanted to exclude certain areas [from the ceasefire] in which we might need to fight – the upper, northern part of the Panjsher and strategic mountains at the top of the Salang Tunnel. But other parts of the Salang did fall under the ceasefire agreement. I thought that the Soviets were keen to sign the ceasefire quickly and because of this they did not pay much attention to the map. Later, however, when fighting broke out in the Shomali, Salang, and other areas, they repeatedly criticised us, especially after Andropov's death. When they came to renew the ceasefire, our discussions turned into hot-tempered debates.[28]

In all, Anatoli said, he and Massoud met five or six times before the cease-fire agreement was finally concluded: 'It was a verbal agreement; we did not exchange any written agreements.'[29] Yet Massoud in his diary wrote that they signed the ceasefire agreement: Anatoli for the Russians, and Massoud for the mujahideen. This is the one place where the accounts of Massoud and Anatoli differ, indicating perhaps the Russian intelligence officer's selective reporting. Interestingly, Anatoli described Massoud as a politician rather than a military

leader. ‘Ahmad Shah [Massoud] proved to be a serious and balanced politician, a sober-minded person, who knew what he was fighting for and who envisioned the ultimate goals of his struggle. We needed to deal with such politicians,’ Anatoli said, and added that he reported as much to Marshal Sokolov.[30] ‘The end result was a genuine ceasefire. The civilian population returned to the Panjsher, the situation on the road between Salang and Kabul became very much quieter, and there was no fighting in the Panjsher Valley until April 1984.’[31]

Registani, who served as military attaché in Dushanbe and helped Massoud record his account, said that at some point he asked Massoud two questions: first, did he think the Russians really wanted to withdraw their troops from the whole of Afghanistan, or just the Panjsher? Second, was the withdrawal from the Panjsher merely a tactical move? Massoud replied, ‘I never heard Anatoli say the Soviets wanted to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan; he only spoke of the Panjsher.’ Secondly, he said, ‘I assume the proposal was merely a tactical move. From their words at the first meeting, I concluded they were suffering heavy casualties and were under tremendous pressure in the Panjsher. They needed more time to prepare for another offensive and their troops’ morale [was] low.’

In fact, Massoud told me in an interview in 1986 that his Soviet inter-locutor had raised the idea of pulling out of Afghanistan, saying, ‘We want to withdraw, but how do we do it?’ Massoud had replied bluntly, ‘Go out the same way you came in.’[32]

Massoud explained to Registani at length how he used the ceasefire to strengthen his own position:

> During these meetings, which lasted for weeks, I prepared myself to bring the situation in Andarab under control. Its capture was vital to us for two reasons. Firstly, Andarab consists of low mountains, which could have provided a supply route for us via the Khawak Pass. Secondly, through Andarab we could have established a connection to northern Afghanistan and supplied ourselves throughout the winter. Our other supply routes – through Laghman, Badakhshan, Takhar and Nuristan Provinces – remained closed during the five months of winter. The route through Andarab is always useful.
>
> By making a surprise attack on a cold and snowy day, we were able to clear Andarab of Hisb-i-Islami in forty-eight hours. We disarmed most of them, but their commander, Juma Khan, escaped with some of his men. As soon as the Soviets found out, they called an emergency meeting, at which they angrily accused me: ‘You used every opportunity to weaken your opposition and strengthen your own position, which is contrary to the ceasefire agreement signed by both sides.’
>
> I said, ‘Juma Khan had closed down our supply route, so we disarmed him. We did not attack your

forces. In addition, we have not reached any formal agreement yet. There are differences amongst mujahideen groups, which have nothing to do with you and our peace plan.'

They said, 'Juma Khan is working for us; he has been working with us for a long time.'

I said that I knew him as a commander of Hisb-i-Islami.

They replied, 'Our Afghan friends [Karmal and his government] are deeply upset with us.' It seemed that the Afghan government had put a lot of pressure on them.[33]

On that occasion, however, Juma Khan had not blocked the supply route, but he consistently misinformed the Afghan government by saying he had done so. Massoud added:

The Soviets requested an immediate withdrawal of our troops from Andarab so that Juma Khan could return.

I strongly opposed this idea, and the discussions lasted for several hours. When they realised that our position on Andarab was firm, they softened their position and dropped the matter.

The clearance of Andarab put me in a better position as regards meetings with the Soviets, and I was not worried any more about the outcome of our meetings. The enemy, which [had] always considered us a threat until a few days ago, was now sitting down at a negotiating table with us.

I knew they did not have any plans to attack us at present; that the Panjsher was not under siege any more; and, moreover, that we were connected to the north of Afghanistan – the clearance of the Andarab gave us a chance to establish bases in the northern provinces of Afghanistan.

Finally, we reached an agreement. The ceasefire treaty was signed for six months. Soviet troops started pulling out of Rokha.[34]

Massoud described a moment when the garrison commander at Rokha pointed at the mountains to the south and said, 'The enemy fired on us daily from those mountains, using a variety of weapons, such as the 12.7 mm Dashaka, rocket launchers, different kinds of artillery – our casualties were high.' At this point, the Russian members of the negotiating team turned to Azmuddin, Massoud's representative, and asked, 'Is this right?' to which he replied, 'Your garrison commander does not have enough information about our weapons. We had more than he mentioned.'

'In fact,' Massoud continued, 'the weapons we had in those mountains were only three 12.7 mm, two light mortars, and a few other light machine guns, but, due to their extremely effective use, they had an incredible effect on the enemy's morale.'

Massoud subsequently used the rare let-up in the fighting to gather the most prominent Jamiat-i-Islami commanders from four northern provinces together in

the first step of his plan to form a broader coordinated front:

> As soon as the six-month ceasefire treaty was signed, I called the Council of Commanders to a meeting and discussed my plans for the expansion of battlefronts in the north. Everyone agreed we should use this opportunity. When I went to the north for the first time, I wasn't too familiar with either the regional commanders or the people. So, my assistant Dr Abdul Hai Elahi suggested we should send someone in advance to make our travel arrangements and organise our programme. When he had done so, we would go. His suggestion made perfect sense, but since I had only six months, which was not enough to do all the things I wanted to do, I decided to go anyway.
>
> Prior to my departure, I sent representatives to Kohdaman and northern Kabul, and asked for attacks to be intensified from southern Salang all the way to Kabul, and for that reason I sent some reinforcements to Salang and Kabul. For the first time in northern Afghanistan, Jamiat commanders held a formal meeting [this was the forerunner of the alliance that Massoud created and named Shura-i-Nazar, later known as the Northern Alliance]. After discussing Afghanistan's situation in general, I emphasised the importance of having organised battlefronts throughout the country. Everyone agreed, except for the late Abdul Hai Khan, commander of Nahrin, who made some comments, and Aref Khan, the commander of Kunduz, who confronted us with silence.[35]

Massoud took charge of four valleys – Andarab, Khost-i-Fereng, Khelab, and Farkhar – all of which extended into the Panjsher Valley:

> At the shura, we divided all the regions into three categories: mountainous, semi-mountainous, and flat. It was decided that I should be directly in charge of the mountainous areas, and the other two categories would come under other mujahideen commanders. It was also decided that, to improve efficiency, we should hold regular meetings.
>
> While I was in northern Afghanistan, our mujahideen were busy fighting the Soviets on various fronts, starting from the Salang all the way to Kariz-i-Mir, 5 km from Kabul. The attacks were usually instigated by us; we constantly ambushed the enemy's supply columns travelling from Termez [on the Afghan–Uzbek border] to Kabul. Our supply route went past Anaba, where the Soviet garrison could clearly see our transport carrying ammunition from Pakistan. They knew we were using this ammunition against the Soviets in other nearby areas, such as the Salang, Gulbahar, and the Shomali Plain.
>
> What annoyed the Soviets most was to see and hear our mujahideen marching and chanting 'Allah-u-Akbar' ['God is great'] through Anaba, near their garrison, on their way to Salang and other northern areas to fight other Soviet forces. The Soviets complained several times about our mujahideen chanting 'Allah-u-Akbar', stating, 'These kinds of slogans have a negative effect on our soldiers' morale, so please stop them.' I totally ignored their request and did not say anything to our mujahideen.
>
> About this time, the Soviets attacked the Shomali [Plain] and surrounding areas. Since the Panjsher lies to the north-east of Shomali, it was a safe haven, thanks to the ceasefire agreement. Thousands of people and hundreds of armed mujahideen from Shomali took refuge there to avoid being encircled by Soviet forces. Among them you could even find armed men who had blocked our supply routes in

the past. But we gave them all shelter in the Panjsher and treated them with respect.

The Soviet forces were unable to encircle the entire Shomali area, so, after two weeks, they halted their operations and withdrew. Local people and armed mujahideen went back to their villages. The Soviets took advantage of the ceasefire in the Panjsher to attack Shomali, but gained nothing: the results were the opposite of what they had calculated. This was not the only advantage which we gained from the ceasefire. The most important task, which we almost completed, was the formation of several new battlefronts like the Panjsher in different parts of the country.

The other benefits were: gaining more information about the enemy; opening new supply routes; stockpiling enough ammunition to fight a long war; establishing contacts with northern commanders; and giving our own mujahideen the chance of a rest after nine months of fighting the Soviets. In addition, the enemy officially recognised us as the true owners of the land.[36]

In April 1983 Anatoli's mission to Afghanistan was brought to an end: 'Massoud was not happy about it and wanted me to stay. I too wanted to stay and said so to my commanding officer who refused … The ceasefire took place, [and] my idea was implemented. I returned to Moscow but our officers' question, "What happens next?" was left unanswered.' It was only after Anatoli arrived home that the growing Soviet opposition to the ceasefire negotiations made itself felt, he said. He was interrogated by the KGB, although the KGB came to his office, and called it not an interrogation, but a 'friendly conversation'.[37] But his Afghan partners bore the brunt of the communist government's anger at the secret deal. 'My colleagues and friends, however, had worse experiences,' Anatoli recounted. 'My interpreter, Amir Mohammad Samarqandi, was placed under interrogation and his house was searched for the decorated dagger Massoud had given him as a present. Mirdad was jailed for seven years and Daoud was sentenced to twenty years and spent six years in Pul-i-Charki Prison.'[38] Built by the Russians on the outskirts of Kabul, the prison had a sinister reputation and was used mainly for political prisoners.

Negotiations to extend the ceasefire in the autumn of 1983, with the delegates who replaced Anatoli, were far more contentious than the first round. When Andropov died in February 1984 and was replaced by Konstantin Chernenko as general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, support for the ceasefire ended. Massoud, thanks to his informants inside the Soviet camp, had a good grasp of what was going on:

When Andropov died and Chernenko succeeded him, Anatoli and his colleagues were replaced by new delegates, who were extremely unhappy about the results of the ceasefire. I was busy

establishing new bases in northern Afghanistan when Azmuddin, our liaison man with the Soviets, sent me a message, saying, ‘The Soviets have sent new delegates and they have made repeated requests for a meeting.’

I got in touch with Agha Sahib and my other agents who were inside the enemy apparatus, and asked them, ‘What is going on? The period of the ceasefire is not over yet; we still have two more months to go! What do they want?’

Agha Sahib said, ‘The new delegates have different ideas. They are very angry about the outcome of the ceasefire. Your support for the mujahideen in Shomali, your attacks on Soviet bases and communes in Salang and Shomali, and your activities in northern Afghanistan are all issues that have made them very annoyed. If they had been ready for operations, they would have attacked you right at the end of the ceasefire. They are not ready, however; they still need a few more months. They are also waiting for the winter to cover the upper parts of the valley with snow.’

Despite their persistent demands for a meeting, I stayed in the north, continued my work, and returned to the Panjsher two or three weeks before the end of the ceasefire. The day of the meeting finally arrived; the new delegation, consisting of four or five representatives, appeared. The head of the delegation started angrily accusing the former delegation of treachery, and went on to say, ‘Our former representatives have signed a treacherous ceasefire agreement that only benefited your side.’ They also accused us of attacking their bases and supply lines in Salang; helping Shomali inhabitants and mujahideen; expanding our bases to the north; [attacking] Andarab; etc. They added, ‘The new ceasefire agreement cannot be signed unless our conditions are met, otherwise we will continue with the war.’

In reply, I said, ‘The ceasefire agreement must not be considered as a favour to us. Don’t forget that by signing this treaty you saved the lives of your soldiers. I should also add that I did not violate the ceasefire agreement at all. Anyway, I will discuss your new conditions with my commanders and get back to you within ten days. One thing I want to make clear is that we will not be intimidated by your threats, and we are ready to face you on the battlefield at any time.’

Their new conditions were so insulting to our dignity that I did not feel comfortable discussing them with my council. Some of them were as follows:

‘Abandon your activities in northern Afghanistan.

‘We will not give permission for ammunition supplies to enter the Panjsher.

‘Your armed forces are not allowed to come close to our forces in the Anaba garrison.

‘You must stop fighting our forces in other locations.

‘Give us detailed information about the location of your ammunition depots and the number of your light and heavy weapons.

‘Stop making barricades in the Panjsher.

‘We will not allow the transport of cement to the Panjsher.’

I think some Afghan government sources opposed to the ceasefire had informed the Soviets that the mujahideen were using cement to build concrete barricades. The reality, however, was different. Local people were using the cement to rebuild their houses. Their new conditions made it clear that they were not happy with the ceasefire and they wanted to buy time to get ready for an attack. I immediately ordered the mujahideen to get ready for the resumption of the war, and told the local people to harvest their crops.

Within ten days, we were prepared for the battle, but people were still bringing in their wheat. So, I postponed the meeting for two more weeks. By then, they [the Soviets] had already found out about our preparations for war.

Eventually, it was time for the second meeting. The new delegation came. This time, I was in military uniform, and was carrying my AK-47 when I shook their hands. I marked a cross on the sheet of proposals which they had given me at our first meeting and gave it back to them. 'This is our answer to your conditions,' I said. I handed them a written copy of my proposals, very similar to the ones we received from them at the first meeting. For instance, I asked them to give us information about the exact number of Soviet troops in Afghanistan, and detailed information regarding their light and heavy weapons, the exact number of their tanks and aeroplanes in Afghanistan, etc.

As the interpreter proceeded with the translation, the delegates' faces turned red. At the end of the translation, an angry argument broke out. One of them pointed at me and said, 'Are you insulting us? Who do you think we are? You will face the consequences.' I was angry at what he said; I crumpled up the sheet of paper which I had crossed out, and threw it at him. I told the rest of them that this person must leave, or I would end the meeting. The situation became extremely tense, and the head of the [Soviet] delegation asked both sides to calm down. I repeated what I had said: 'As long as this person is here, there won't be any meeting.' The head of the Soviet delegation said, 'We are one group; it is not possible for one of us to leave the meeting.' I said, 'Then there is nothing left to discuss.' They did not accept my demand, but instead left the room.

Outside, the Soviet delegates spoke amongst themselves for a few minutes, and then asked the host of the meeting, Jan Mohammad [Massoud's quartermaster], to mediate between us. Angrily, I told Jan Mohammad not to get involved in this matter. After realising that there was no alternative, the delegates left that particular person outside, and the rest of them entered the room. The person who was left out of the meeting smoked continuously until the end of the meeting, which I continued with the rest of them.

After a long debate, we extended the ceasefire until 23 April 1984. I knew that this month was a very good time for the Soviets to attack us. But I had no choice, because my task in the north was unfinished. I needed another six months to finish establishing the new bases there. The ceasefire agreement was signed for another six months. Their delegation left after the meeting.

The next day, the Soviets sent me a message through Azmuddin, saying, 'We do not accept yesterday's ceasefire agreement signed between us. We believe that you threatened us and forced us to sign it. We want to have another meeting with you, and this time we will not come to the upper part of the valley. The meeting must take place near our garrison.'

My next and last meeting with them took place near the Tawakh River, 3 km from their garrison at Anaba, at night, inside a jeep. It was quite different from the previous meetings. After a short discussion, we signed the new ceasefire agreement, which was not very different from the previous agreements, except that this time I could tell that Soviet policy was changing again, reverting to what it was in Brezhnev's time.[39]

What does not appear in any of the accounts is a little-known detail that Mirdad related to me when I met him in Kabul in 2014. He had long kept the information secret to protect those involved. In February 1984, he and Daoud

were told they would be travelling to Moscow to meet the Soviet leader Andropov. They duly turned up at the Soviet airbase at Bagram to await a flight, but instead they encountered Anatoli, who arrived from Moscow with the sad news that Andropov had just died, so their trip was cancelled and they returned to Kabul. Two or three months later, Anatoli returned and Mirdad met him again. Anatoli had travelled specially to pass on a warning to Mirdad and to Massoud. He explained about the divisions within the KGB, and warned that, with the death of Andropov, the policy in Afghanistan was going to change. 'It is a bad situation; take care of yourself,' he told Mirdad. He told him to warn Massoud that the Russians were preparing to attack the Panjsher and that he should prepare to evacuate the population, which Massoud did, saving many lives. 'Anatoli was honest,' Mirdad said. 'Three months before the decision, he gave the message.' That a KGB colonel was prepared to tip off a guerrilla leader about an upcoming Russian offensive was extraordinary, but it indicated Anatoli's belief in working with the mujahideen rather than fighting them, and the high regard in which he held Massoud. 'It was because he was very interested in Massoud,' Mirdad said. 'He trusted Massoud and trusted the ceasefire.'

The ceasefire was never made public, and Soviet officials always denied negotiating with the mujahideen, but, as it became known, Massoud drew criticism from his own side, from allies such as Burhanuddin Rabbani – the leader of Jamiat-i-Islami, the party to which Massoud belonged – as well as furious denunciations of 'treachery' from rivals like Hekmatyar. The main backers of the mujahideen, Pakistan and the United States, began to complain that Massoud was unwilling to fight and undermining the thrust of the resistance. The stigma of dealing with the Russians resonated far and wide. Even years later, members of the Taliban criticised Massoud for the agreement, which they said brought him a reprieve but freed up the Soviets to conduct harsh offensives against other mujahideen groups.

This is how Massoud summed up the whole ceasefire episode:

> Overall, our achievements during the one-year ceasefire were as follows:
> • Formation of four important military bases round the Panjsher – Andarab-Khost-i-Fereng, Tabe in Baghlan Province, the Khelab Valley and Farkhar in Takhar Province. These bases are very useful, even now;
> • Clearance of Andarab and the opening of our supply route to the Panjsher;
> • Formation of the Shura-i-Nazar;

• Establishment of central army groups as the basis of a future national army;
• Establishing links with northern mujahideen groups;
• The official recognition of the mujahideen by the Soviets. Previously, they always referred to us as ‘saboteurs’.

Although the ceasefire was effective in a limited area of Afghanistan, we still acted as the representatives of all mujahideen, and sent on their behalf a clear message about their objectives, their demands, and their strong opposition to the Soviets’ authority. During the meetings, the Soviets never treated us as a single group of mujahideen. We always gave them the impression that we were one nation fighting for one common cause.

In every meeting, I tried to convince them that they had made a big mistake by attacking our beloved country, and I repeatedly conveyed the message to them that eventually we would win this war.

As for the two unlikely friends Mirdad and Anatoli, who risked their lives to help bring about the ceasefire, they saw the ceasefire as not only a valuable achievement that saved lives but one that offered a path to resolving the war. Mirdad suffered terribly for his part in the negotiations. In 1984 he was jailed with his wife, his five-month-old baby, his brother, and his cousin, among others. In all, seventeen members of his extended family were detained. He endured seven months of solitary confinement and interrogation with beatings and electrocution. ‘The torture was terrible,’ he told me in an interview in Kabul years later. ‘I wonder how I survived all of that.’[40]

The communist party, and even the KGB, was divided over the issue of the ceasefire, Mirdad explained. ‘One group was “pro” the ceasefire and another group was against it. The KGB was two groups,’ he said. The group that was close to the communist leader Babrak Karmal fingered Mirdad as the person who had gone with the Russian representative to meet Massoud. ‘They requested me to go with them and I went,’ he said. His interrogators wanted who was behind the ceasefire. They asked day after day what was in the letter that was hand-delivered to Massoud, and why Mirdad had not informed his own government about it. ‘They had different types of torture,’ he said. ‘They asked, “Why did you not give this message to the president?” I said, “The president knows.”’ Mirdad told them the issue was decided between America and Russia, and by ambassadors and experts, far above his position. ‘Seven months I was on my own, and tortured. I don’t know how I survived. I don’t know myself. Yeah, tough story,’ he said.

He remained seven years in Pul-i-Charki prison and was only released after

the Russian withdrawal, in a pitiful state of mental and physical distress. ‘I had a mental problem,’ he said. ‘My right hand was paralysed, and I was in a very bad situation.’ Friends helped him get a passport, and he travelled to Bulgaria and then to Belgium, where an old classmate, a doctor, nursed him back to health. When Mirdad returned home to Afghanistan, Massoud sent a car and brought him to the Panjsher, where he was still fighting the communist government. They spent three days and three nights together, talking things over.

Unlike Massoud, Mirdad was convinced that Anatoli, and by inference his bosses, right up to Andropov himself, had been looking for a way to get out of the fighting in Afghanistan as early as 1982, and the success of the ceasefire with Massoud and the liaison group that helped implement it had shown them a way. Daoud now ran an office in Anaba and became the main liaison between the two sides.

‘The ceasefire was the beginning in establishing and in bringing both sides of the government into a collaboration with each other,’ Mirdad said. ‘After that they made a coalition of the government.’ The ceasefire brought peace to a much larger area than just the Panjsher, he insisted, drawing in other commanders in the north. By example, it offered a way to expand peace across Afghanistan. Anatoli’s vision was not just for a ceasefire in the Panjsher, Mirdad said: ‘There was no question: it was all of Afghanistan.’

8

Marriage and War

The story of Massoud's marriage to Tajuddin's daughter, Sediqa, has the quality of a fairy tale: the Warrior Prince and the Village Maiden. It begins with the Panjsheri elders being concerned that their leader, now in his early thirties and preoccupied with the war against the Russians, showed no sign of getting married. Normally, his mother would have taken the matter in hand, but she had died, and because of the war his five sisters were all living abroad.

Massoud first considered marriage to a girl from Khost-i-Fereng, but when his brother Yahya offered to make the journey there to ask for her hand, Massoud told him there was more important work for him to do for the war effort in Peshawar. Enter Tajuddin. He was asked to make the arduous journey to Khost, traversing the 3,800-metre-high Khawak Pass with the marriage proposal, which he did – but he came back empty handed. When I quizzed him about it, he gave me a short answer: 'It is actually a family affair, and the dignity of families are concerned.' I argued, however, that personal information about Massoud was of great public interest. Tajuddin said, 'Firstly, whoever gives their daughter to Massoud to marry would be under threat of the Russians and the communist regime. We went to Khost-i-Fereng … and we investigated the matter, and the requirements of the family were not acceptable to me, nor to Massoud. Massoud wanted to have everything simple, but the family wanted an elaborate wedding.'[1] When I asked Tajuddin if Massoud had married his daughter, Sediqa, on the rebound from this incident, he replied: 'From that incident, five to six years passed before Massoud married my daughter.'

In fact, they married barely a year later, in April 1987. Sediqa was seventeen

and Massoud thirty-four years old. Sediqa published her own account of her life and marriage with Massoud, *Pour l'amour de Massoud*.[2] It was a project in which Massoud encouraged her. The book was co-written with Chékéba Hachemi, an Afghan activist who lives in France, and Marie-Françoise Colombani, a French journalist who works for *Elle* magazine. She recounted that when Massoud asked her father for her hand, Tajuddin at first refused, saying to Massoud that she was too young and too little educated to shoulder such a responsibility as marriage to the guerrilla leader. Massoud insisted, however, saying that she already knew well the sort of life he led as a fighter, that she could continue to live with her parents, and that he would be her teacher. Massoud also met Sediqa, chaperoned by her mother, to ask her directly if she were ready to marry him – an unusual step in such a traditional society. She was so shy and overwhelmed by his presence, by her account, that she dared not look at him or speak to him directly but answered to her mother.

Massoud explained that the marriage would have to be held in secret, because 'if the enemy learns about our marriage, they will bombard us and also you will become my weakness as, in order to undermine me, they will try to reach you'. He also asked Sediqa if she would agree never to show her face to any men outside her immediate family after their marriage. Sediqa wrote that Massoud's request that she remain in purdah, in effect, which included even not showing her face to her husband's brothers, was not to prevent her from moving around and travelling but was more for her own protection in a time of war, when being anonymous was the best way to survive. It was a request that she could have refused, but she did not: 'Never for one single moment in my life have I regretted the reply that I gave: "Yes, I accept!"'[3]

A simple wedding was held in the house where Tajuddin's family lived at the time, with none of the traditional preparations or invitations to wedding guests. One morning, she was told by her mother, 'I have heated some water for you; go and get ready! Tonight you will be married!'[4] Her mother and aunt dressed the nervous bride and did her make-up. Massoud dressed with the help of Tajuddin, his future father-in-law. When Sediqa saw the groom arrive in white with a green silk *chapan* thrown over his shoulders, she said, her heart stopped beating: 'He was magnificent. When he sat down next to me, I thought I would faint!'[5]

Sediqa quickly settled into a new routine of sudden departures and arrivals by

her husband as he continued prosecuting the war: ‘I never knew the hour or day of his arrival. Our whole life I would watch for the noise of a helicopter, the sound of his voice or the echo of his footsteps’, she wrote.[6] His walkie-talkie was permanently on, buzzing at the head of their bed.[7] Nevertheless, they lived happily for the next five years in the village of Piu, she said: ‘Even when I was mad with worry, I never let him see it.’[8]

Tajuddin, now Massoud’s father-in-law, was an intensely loyal and faithful follower. I asked him what it was about Massoud that enabled him to unite the Panjsheris when he was still comparatively young. He answered by telling a story:

> There is one main point which shows how thoughtful he was, how respectful, always aware of people’s dignity, which is the most important thing for all Afghans. In one area, the Shotul, where about 1,000 residents live, there was a local leader, Malik Ayab, who was like a king, and then there was also a poor driver who had, however, the required quality to become a commander under Massoud.
>
> Massoud appointed as a commander this poor man who didn’t even have an army waistcoat with pockets to carry his day-to-day essentials. He tied his pyjamas at the bottom and placed essentials in them. Also, this man lost his village and everything he had and chose to fight. The fact that Massoud chose this man over the richer village leader showed that Massoud based his choice on leadership and hard work. When Massoud chose the driver as commander, that village leader lost face and his authority among the villagers.
>
> Because the dignity of the village leader was hurt, Massoud went to his house ten times and said, ‘we are your guests.’ Because of the rules of Afghan hospitality, the man spent all his money on food for Massoud and, when he had nothing left, finally told him, ‘Commander Sahib Massoud, I have nothing left to give you now as my guest.’ Massoud said, ‘If you do not have chicken, you can give me dried yoghurt, or tea and bread.’ The man said, ‘I know that you are taking a lot of time and trouble to come to my house, and therefore I am impressed and know that you want my dignity preserved, and I thank you.’
>
> Malik praised Massoud for keeping his dignity intact and respecting him. Due to that, he accepted the new commander and respects him. This man is still commander of that village. Massoud treated people with respect and dignity, and that is how he got people on his side and united people – by respecting their dignity.[9]

I asked whether Tajuddin thought this was what made Massoud a great man. In answer, he told me a story of how Massoud had handled the killing by one of his fighters of a villager in the Panjsher:

> When you respect people, and preserve their dignity, that is the most important thing in Afghanistan.

When you respect people's dignity, they join your side.

There is a tribe called Firaj, and there were two brothers who were leaders there, one called Dostum and the other Begrah. The village was completely split between them; each led about 1,000 people. But they also fought each other. The problem was that if Massoud picked one brother, then the other would not respect the decision. So, Massoud brought in a commander, Sabour, from another area. When they brought this new commander, one of his bodyguards killed a person from Firaj. There was a big outcry, and they brought the guard to court. The Sharia [Islamic law] court decided that the man should be executed by the same type of bullet that had killed the young man.[10]

The dead man's family refused to forgive the fighter, and the moment for the execution came. A great crowd of people gathered in the village of Malaspa to witness the execution. The condemned man had said his last prayers when a last-minute reprieve happened, as described by Tajuddin:

The father of the man who was killed, and who was supposed to execute the killer, took the gun and walked over to the man. Instead of killing him, he gave him the gun and told him to go and continue doing jihad. The 2,000 or 3,000 people gathered to see the execution started weeping with emotion. People wanted to get pieces of his clothing as a souvenir.

The conclusion is that people were involved and felt they were involved. Massoud allowed the case to go to court, kept intact the dignity of the family, then, after the decision was made to execute him, Massoud again preserved the dignity of the family. Eventually, the man made his own decision to pardon the killer, and gave him the rifle and told him to go to jihad and fight the enemy. There were thousands of similar events in which [Massoud] respected people and defended their rights and dignity, and brought the people together.[11]

Tajuddin described how Massoud's ability to listen to the people allowed him to make one of the toughest decisions for his community, when the ceasefire ended and the Russians resumed all-out war in the spring of 1984, with Panjsher VII:

This valley of Panjsher is about 150 km long; in it live half a million people. Before the start of Panjsher VII, Massoud asked all these people to leave the valley – everyone from children one year old to the oldest. When the Russians arrived, they found the valley completely empty. This showed how people agreed to leave. Originally, Massoud asked all the elders, religious leaders, and commanders to discuss the matter of leaving the valley. In the end, a small group of about ten people was selected, and they decided that Massoud should make the decision; he decided that everyone should leave the valley. [This meant] that he had the agreement of the people before he ordered people to leave the valley. It was not a 'diktat' of one person, but his decision was based on the agreement of the community.[12]

9

Defeat and Failure: ‘Am I Afraid of Death?’

Ahmad Shah Massoud kept a diary for most of his life, starting – at a guess – in the early 1970s, when he was in his late teens or early twenties. He wrote them by hand in exercise books, usually late at night, and – because of the hectic nature of his life, constantly embroiled in wars – at irregular intervals, whenever he had time. Unfortunately, few of his diaries are available, having been either lost or kept private by various members of the family who are reluctant to make them public.

However, I was able to discover the existence of two small caches of diaries. One is in the possession of Massoud’s youngest brother, Ahmad Wali, formerly the Afghan ambassador in London and now chair of the Massoud Foundation in Kabul. The foundation is the natural repository for the diaries, but Ahmad Wali says that he has only three volumes in his possession (mainly written in 1983–4), to which he has given me access and which I have had translated. The entries give a good picture of what Massoud’s life must have been like and whet one’s appetite for more details, especially those describing the critical moments of his career. I quote extracts from these diaries, never published before, in the several chapters that follow, which in particular throw a fascinating light on Massoud’s role during the war against the Soviets.

In 2015, to my surprise, I was told by Massoud’s only son, Ahmad, that his mother, Massoud’s widow, Sediqa, had several more diaries, covering the last three years of Massoud’s life – 1999, 2000, and 2001 – and leading up to his assassination in September 2001. Ahmad said they were in Sediqa’s house in the Iranian city of Mashhad, just across the border from Herat in western

Afghanistan, where the family lived after Massoud's assassination, presumably for security reasons. Ahmad, who is in favour of my biography of his father – the first in English – told me his mother was willing to let me have access to the diaries for the purposes of the biography. Full access remained blocked, however, owing to the intervention of at least one member of the family. Eventually, Ahmad provided nine pages of content from these later diaries.

Writing at the beginning of one of his earlier diaries, Massoud expressed a belief which may be seen as typical of his fundamental optimism.[1]

He is God
Jera Aub
24–25.2.1363
[14–15.5.1984]
11:40 p.m.

Defeat and failure are bad and bitter, and no doubt there is nothing worse than defeat in armed combat against an implacable enemy. But with all the grief and misfortune that defeat and failure bring, yet sometimes they are the precursors of victory, a great victory that previously could not have been imagined.

Many times in my life, I have experienced such a thing. My victories have always come after tasting the bitterness of defeat and failure. I can remember a time when, in the year 1348 [1975],[2] my forces were defeated by government troops, and we were scattered.

Most of the people who had been with us looked at us with hatred and considered us the causes of their misfortune. Within less than two or three days, most of the people who had been proud to stand beside us had become opposed to us and looked at us with scorn. It was as if they had always been communists and hadn't actually stood with us for years. They had all become strangers while suffering such pain as is impossible to describe.

However, this misfortune and failure is often the beginning of victory, and even though we were small and facing many difficulties, we have risen to fame and pride in being the symbol of the Islamic resistance of the mujahideen of Afghanistan against the superpower of Russia. Such examples this year have been many, and I remember many unfortunate and unpalatable events which in themselves were a stimulus to progress, and to rapid progress in my life.

I have written this relatively lengthy introduction because of a recent defeat at Khost-i-Fereng, a defeat which I did not foresee, which I never thought could come about so quickly or so easily, in which the enemy landed about 2,000 troops by helicopter in Khost,[3] killed dozens of people, dishonoured the women, and took more than 100 prisoners.

There was an attack on the Panjsher on 31 Hamal [20 April]. We also had an attack on Andarab on 9 Hamal [29 March], and an attack on Khost on 13 Hamal [2 April].[4] We had only about 1,000 armed men and nothing much by way of heavy weapons to oppose our well-armed foe. So, we had to use evasive, defensive tactics; we could do nothing else, and the enemy, after hitting us hard, merely had to climb back into its helicopters and fly away while we were left, ashamed, to climb back down from

the mountains to the villages below.

However, we must not forget that the fighting in Khost was merely part of a much wider campaign, which started north of Kabul, in the Shomali Plain, went right up to Kunduz and Takhar, and now includes the fighting in the Panjsher, which is the enemy's main and biggest target, and which is still going on. We can count ourselves more or less victorious, and we have been able to resist the most violent attacks against us in the Salang, especially in the southern Salang and in the northern area, Saha Shomali, as well as in Andarab, and we have been able to hit the enemy hard there. So, in general, I could claim that, with God's help, we have been relatively successful in the fighting, and even in the latest campaign we have in a sense been victorious.

But the particular defeat and failure in Khost is very painful and embitters all the sweetness of success that we have had elsewhere. This failure and defeat have really shaken me and made a big impression. I am very saddened by it, and I am embarrassed by and ashamed of it in front of other people. And we must not underestimate it. I certainly must not underestimate it or take it lightly. I must analyse all the reasons individually, one by one, and seek them out to draw the necessary conclusions.

The events Massoud relates here were the opening attacks of Panjsher VII, the seventh major offensive by the Soviet army against the Panjsher Valley and the resumption of all-out war after the collapse of the ceasefire agreement. As Anatoli had warned, Chernenko's leadership represented a return of the hardliners in the Soviet Union. Furious at how the mujahideen had 'exploited' the ceasefire, the Soviet command was determined to wipe out the Afghan resistance in the area once and for all, and launched Panjsher VII, VIII, and IX almost consecutively from April to December 1984. It was the Soviet army's most sustained effort against the Panjsher, and it proved devastating for the civilian population who were forced to leave the valley (as well as those of a much wider area). However, Massoud and his fighters survived the onslaught, and by the end of the year he felt he had successfully defeated his opponents in each episode.

He describes first learning about the impending offensive in late March:

On 9 Hamal [29 March], I was informed by my intelligence agents of the details of the planned attack on the Panjsher by the Russians [Panjsher VII]. It was an extraordinary plan, with a remarkably large number of troops involved – some being landed by helicopter – and jets due to take part. Both the Afghan communist army and the Russian communist army were going to take part in this attack on the Panjsher. There were four brigades and platoons and hundreds of helicopters due to take part. Before the attack by ground forces on the Panjsher, the valley was to be heavily bombed, and poison gas would possibly even be used. Then the helicopters would land hundreds of troops on the highest mountaintops overlooking the valley, and, after that, ground troops would begin the attack from the

lowest part of the valley. One of the military bases was to be in Anaba, and the second one in Bazarak. When I saw the enemy's plan, which was written and drawn on a large sheet of paper, I was really astonished and even a little afraid, for I understood that, to counter such an attack by the enemy, I would have to make very good preparations. But I had never thought that there would be an attack on this very large scale. I was uneasy, and dozens of aspects of the problem rushed through my mind.

It had been planned that I would go to Gulbahar and have a meeting with Niazi of Hisb-i-Islami. Engineer Habib had decided to accompany me and go on to Rokha. There were two Volgas ready to leave, including my black Volga, and when it was more peaceful and calm, I left for Rokha with Ahmad Zia [Massoud's middle brother] and Engineer Tajuddin – and myself at the wheel. The enemy's plan did not leave my mind for one moment. From the first time I read through their plan, I thought of a retreat from the valley. That thought flashed through my mind like lightning and, as we were driving, over and over again this idea came to my mind and I was formulating a more precise plan.

I stopped the car near Mullakhel, took a piece of paper from my pocket, and, for the first time, started discussing the matter with Engineer Tajuddin and Ahmad Zia.

As it happened, when I asked for Engineer's [Tajuddin's] opinion, he also suggested a retreat, and during the trip we also discussed the matter with Sar Anwal Mahmoud Khan.[5] On the 12th of the same month [1 April], we had a discussion – a little mini-parliament – with some of the scholars in the area, some of the limited number of commanders, and some of the mujahideen in Zehreb, and I appointed a council, a shura, to discuss the matter. After a lot of discussion, we all agreed on the necessity of withdrawing our forces, and so on the very next day I started drawing up the plan. In order to do so, I had to deal with certain matters:

1. Transport all our ammunition and ensure its safekeeping in several bases farther away;
2. Send money to the various bases, so that both the mujahideen and the refugees should be able, once they were settled in these new bases, to buy necessities – food and other things;
3. Send various groups of fighters out of the valley in secret ways, and with various reasons given;
4. Send our heavy weaponry in a secretive way, and with various different reasons and excuses.

Soviet troops began their attacks that same day to the north in Andarab and soon after in Khost-i-Fereng. By May, Massoud had been fighting them in the Panjsher for nearly a month.

He is God
Jera Aub
25.2.1363
[15.5.1984]

It is morning now, and the weather, unlike at night-time, is clear and sunny. Last night I was awake till after midnight, and after the morning prayer today, contrary to my normal habit, I fell asleep again, but now that I have a little time I must go back to my diary.

Our defeat in Khost had a number of reasons, which can be categorised as external and internal.

The external causes of our defeat are those matters which could and should have been taken into consideration before the beginning of the fighting, whereas the so-called inner or innate causes of the defeat and failure are those matters which arose during the course of the fighting.

Massoud listed point by point the reasons for their failure:

First, external causes.

1. Insufficient provisions in the mujahideen bases. We did not store enough food and, even before the beginning of the fighting, the mujahideen were complaining about the lack of sustenance;
2. The general command post for the fighting was placed at the point farthest away from the centre of Khost, and was established in a place where it could not be in contact with all the other areas concerned;
3. A lack of communication between the different mujahideen posts by either messenger or radio;
4. The local mujahideen were absolutely not prepared for battle, and were too spread out;
5. In Olang Zarde, where the enemy was concentrated, there were no mujahideen units to attack them;
6. There were no mujahideen units in reserve in suitable places that could have reinforced our weak spots, or attacked the enemy's weak spots.

Next, he listed the innate reasons for the lack of success:

1. When the news came of the enemy attack, the commanders – especially those in Fereng – neither paid sufficient attention to it nor prepared themselves, and they did not inform the people of the imminence of the attack;
2. They were slow off the mark, rather ineffectual, the last to attack the enemy, and almost on the defensive;
3. The commanders were unable to communicate effectively with each other, and they were equally unable to develop a unified strategy or plan against the enemy;
4. The local people did not feel any loyalty to our mujahideen. The local leaders in the area were not cooperative, and they didn't even provide the wherewithal to fill our fighters' stomachs;
5. The landing of enemy commandos by helicopter had a very

demoralising effect on the morale of our men;

6. The whole area had previously been cleared out and armed, presumably by communists and communist sympathisers.

Massoud went on to list his own ‘shortcomings’:

1. I firmly think that, more than anyone else, I am responsible for this failure and defeat, principally because I appointed Gulza Khan overall commander in this campaign – which was on a level engaging the whole of the uluswal [‘administrative district’] – and that was not a sensible decision. To begin with, I had not thought precisely about the likelihood of the enemy attacking Khost;
2. I did not pay sufficient attention to supplying the mujahideen with food;
3. Before being absolutely certain that the whole area was militarily prepared and that the mujahideen were all ready to fight, I had already left for Ishkamish. Several units that I should have kept in reserve in Khelab I sent to remote places. When I was informed of the Russian attack on Khost, I didn’t set aside time to deal with this problem or to go directly to the area myself;
4. All the propaganda that has been disseminated about the Russians being about to capture me had forced me to stay in the background, and I had busied myself preparing Ishkamish as a base of resistance, whereas I really should have immediately gone to attack the Russians in Khost with a unit of my own; I should have linked up with the other groups, and I should have led the fighting.

Massoud was often deeply self-critical in his diaries, but his notes reveal the extreme difficulties of running a guerrilla war, in particular of motivating and directing fighters while managing supplies and local rivalries. He returned to writing two days later in a new location.

He is God
Yawur
27.2.1363
[17.5.1984]
9:51 a.m.

Today I have fallen again into a situation that I always feared. Experience shows that it is impossible to fight on several fronts with several different enemies at the same time. It is precisely because of this that, during the past year of ceasefire, I have tried – whether by applying pressure or by discussions and talks – to establish around our bases in the Panjsher conditions that will prevent Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hisb-i-Islami or other groups making problems for us behind our backs, when once again the struggle with the Russians resumes.

It is important that our supply lines remain open and that the local civilian populations of the areas where we are operating should cooperate with our mujahideen. Unfortunately, even though I thought we had progressed in this direction, today I am aware of the unfortunate situation that things are worse than I feared. According to my latest information, after the defeat and withdrawal of the Russians from Andarab, once again members of Hisb-i-Islami have attacked and entered Andarab and are encouraging the locals to expel all the Panjsheris.

There has been a meeting of the 'white beards', the elders of Andarab, under the guidance of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hisb-i-Islami, and of the communist government, to decide together on the expulsion of the Panjsheris from Andarab. Juma Khan [Hekmatyar's commander], who has been elected leader there with the help of the communist government, has been suggesting this plan. Again, according to the reports, only two of the elders opposed this motion; all the others agreed to the expulsion of the Panjsheris from Andarab. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hisb-i-Islami has also blocked our supply routes in Sinjid Dare, and fighting between these groups – Panjsheris and Hisb-i-Islami with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – has once again started in Wazghor of Ghorband.

This passage illustrates, not for the first time, how Hekmatyar's commanders, and specifically Juma Khan, collaborated with the Russians against Massoud. The diary continues with another example of inter-mujahideen treachery that even more surprisingly involves another commander of Jamiat, which was led by Rabbani and of which Massoud was the supreme military commander. The combination of military pressure and subversion from within the mujahideen movement undermined Massoud's forces and their relations with the local population at a critical moment, when his attention was elsewhere. Massoud wrote:

I have no idea at the moment of the precise state of affairs as regards our supply routes through Laghman. Merely as the result of a slight and superficial misunderstanding, Abdul Hai, the commander of Baghlan for Jamiat-i-Islami of Rabbani, has tried to arouse the people of Baghlan against us, and, after a meeting with the elders and with the parties based in Nahrin, decided to expel Panjsheri mujahideen from Nahrin. Sometimes they falsely claim that we have relationships with the communist government, and at other times they blame us for the suffering and disturbance of their civilians, and for the military pressure and the bombing carried out by our enemies in Nahrin. And they told the civilians that wherever the Panjsheris appear, the government will bomb the area.

Members of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hisb-i-Islami in the Shomali area have not shown any

preparedness to fight – even though their leader, Hekmatyar, announced that they should fight – for approximately the last twenty-eight days, nor have they taken any action against the communist enemy; all their time has been wasted in endless meetings. Some Jamiat commanders in the Shomali area, who are basically traitors whether through sheer incompetence or through betrayal, have left the field as we are fighting, and are plotting to make things more difficult for the Panjsheris and for other real mujahideen.

In brief, I would say that both pressure from the communist government's plots and subversion by Hisb-i-Islami and by some traitorous Jamiati commanders have brought about a situation in which we, as Panjsheris, are no longer at one with the people, the civilians of the surrounding areas. We have been distanced from them, and the majority look on us as enemies, whereas we have done nothing to these people except help them; we have done them no evil, we have not executed anyone, nor have we fined anyone any money, nor have we even asked them to provide us with the Islamic *ushr* ['agricultural tax'] – so we have taken nothing from them, we have helped them, and yet they are still our opponents.

Our enemies, the communists, at the same time have been successful in making use of the people's ignorance and petty local loyalties, and they have separated the mujahideen from their civilian support. There are ways of solving the problems to prevent this happening again, but, unfortunately, the shortage of time and unfavourable circumstances – and, I must also admit, some of my own innate laziness – have not allowed us to address the problem.

As so often, even as he analysed his mistakes, Massoud saw a way forward. The next entry was written in a place called Anjeeristan, which means 'the place of fig trees', and it provides a reminder of the ever-present danger of Soviet bombing:

He is God
Anjeeristan
29.2.1363
[19.5.1984]

Fifteen minutes ago, four jets bombed the area around our base. One hour previously, a helicopter had flown over the valley from top to bottom and twice circled the base, acting as a guide for the jet. It did this by dropping flares to light up the area for the jet. A short time before the helicopter arrived, our brother mujahideen up in the valley and in the mountains above the valley had seen the helicopter arriving. I fear that Yawur may have been bombed, and I fear also that some of our brother mujahideen may have been wounded. The jeep driver left with a French doctor from Médecins sans Frontières before it became obvious what the aeroplanes were doing. They left in the direction of Khost, and I do not know yet what happened to them. After the attacks on Panjsher, Andarab, and Khost, this is the second bombing of the Khelab Valley by the communist enemy.

No doubt the enemy had received recent information about units of the Panjsheri mujahideen in that area. If they had not heard about the presence of our mujahideen units in Khelab, they would not have put such pressure on the area. The bombing lasted altogether half an hour, and there was a new

type of jet, a new model, which I have not seen before. Sayed Ikramaddin and Sayed Yahya had gone down the valley so that they could get information about current conditions there. Luckily, two or three days previously, the mujahideen of Khenj who were present at the base left for Khawesh, and there was no one left on the base other than two junior officers. They had readied two Dashaka machine guns, as they were the only ones available. There is a serious and dangerous possibility that medical supplies and stores of ammunition at the base may have been destroyed.

The next annotation was made at 11:40 a.m., seemingly on the same day:

Right now, some SU-22 [Soviet Sukhoi] jets are circling above my head. It is not yet clear where they are going to drop their bombs. Probably they will busy themselves bombing the adjacent valleys, and very probably they are going to bomb the exact place where we are now. I do not know why these fools have now taken things so seriously. I hope they do not land commandos. In the past, whether in Ishkamish or in other areas of the north, it did not often happen that the jets would bomb the same area many times. The enemy has probably received news of the presence of our mujahideen and is probably also aware of my own presence here – but we shall see what we shall see.

In the diary entry that followed, Massoud was at his most personal, asking himself, ‘Right now, am I afraid of death?’ and immediately answering his own question, unequivocally:

No, definitely not. I swear by God, if I were killed at this moment, I would be satisfied to die, and I have full faith that God would respect His promises and would forgive my sins, greater or lesser, and would grant me eternal life and peace as my portion.

My only worry is my brother mujahideen who are with me in the same base; how would they fare? This is a painful thought, but not so painful as all that – for God looks after all men, and they believe in Him, and He has power over all, and He is stronger than all and more long-lasting and firm. And if one door shuts, a hundred other doors will open.

But, in truth, my fear is that I may be taken prisoner. If the communists took me alive, and humiliated me, and tortured me, and forced me to give a confession, and if I were unable to withstand that pressure, and if I had to reveal the identities of my fellow combatants under pressure from the enemy – that I really fear.

Oh God, all good lies in Your hands. I would accept being killed a hundred times and gladly, but please don’t allow me to become a prisoner in the hands of my enemies. You are my Creator. You hear my prayer. Do not deliver me alive into the hands of my enemies.

The other thing that I fear and that worries me is defeat and failure. If the Russians really take and hold all of Afghanistan, we will indeed have failed and been defeated, and we will be forced to live as strangers in another land. Oh God, do not allow this to happen for one moment, for we could not suffer this. To be killed would be infinitely preferable to failing, to being defeated, and to being driven into exile.

As soon as he had learned of the impending offensive, Massoud had understood the need to pull fighters and civilians, as well as equipment and supplies, out of the valley in order to save lives. But once the Soviet offensive was underway, he began inserting mujahideen units back into the valley to harass the enemy – a hazardous enterprise, as the Russians had started to drop commandos on the heights by helicopter to intercept them. Massoud remained out of reach, directing and supporting his units from outside the valley, but often only receiving news of events by courier days after attacks had unfolded.

He is God
30.2.1363
[20.5.1984]

I was in a teahouse near Anjeeristan and I was waiting for a vehicle to come, in order to go to Khawesh. It had been agreed that I would go from Khawesh secretly in the direction of the Panjsher. Either the vehicle was delayed or I fell asleep in the teahouse, but it was near 12 noon when they woke me up and brought me a letter from Karam Shah, which had just arrived from the Panjsher. As I read it, I was informed about the recent events of 25 Saur [15 May][6] and what had happened in the Panjsher. It was as follows.

On 25 Saur the Kashoff – the enemy's reconnaissance plane – flew repeatedly over the area of the Panjsher. There were four different types of jets, which started bombing the valley. And there were helicopters, which also took part in the bombing. On the same day, approximately 450 enemy soldiers left Dasht-i-Rewat, and on the following day, a bigger number of the enemy established themselves over in the mountains above Khenj. On the next day, 300 more left for Dasht-i-Rewat.

While the Russians were patrolling the area around Nash, a number of them went to Parian, according to one Pariani. There were sixty tanks, each one armed with a cannon, and they established themselves in Dasht-i-Rewat.

I studied the communication and, as they say, I fell into slightly troubled thought. I was afraid that the units of mujahideen that I had sent to the Panjsher might be ignorant of these developments, but, according to Karam Shah, Commander Mirza managed during three attacks to destroy a great number of the enemy, and when the firing and the bombing became too intense, the mujahideen withdrew to the heights. During the battle, three mujahideen were taken prisoner. The enemy was firing on Shaba [a high-sided valley above Astana] from Rokha and Khenj.

Massoud mentioned his concern that radio communication with mujahideen in Parandeh, a central village in the Panjsher, had been cut for two days:

This gives me some concern; I got into the jeep, which has now arrived at the bridge, and meanwhile my fellow mujahideen are saying their prayers, and during those prayers a violent rainstorm breaks out – and we take refuge from the heavy rain on the brow of the hill, and I make use of the time to write down these notes.

The house of Kaka Mirza
30.2.1363
[20.5.1984]

It is raining heavily. We decided not to go to Yawur; instead, we remained at the teahouse of Kaka Mirza, who, since my earliest youth, has been one of my very close friends. It is pleasantly warm inside the teahouse, and there are only three or four other people here drinking their tea. Kaka Mirza has always been extremely kind to me, and every time I come, he clears the private rooms of the house, and tells the women to go out so that I can go inside. I indicated, without speaking, to Shah Niaz that he should go and have a look to see whether the house was clear and whether I could go inside. A few minutes later, I understood by signs that a departure was imminent, leaving it empty, and I was able to enter the house where I always stayed.

I was very disturbed and uneasy about the new attack by the Russians on the Panjsher. In addition to the Russians' attack, the behaviour of Juma Khan in Andarab also made me very uneasy. However, I am not the sort of person who will give up at the slightest confrontation, and, even though I can get upset, any concern will soon be dispelled, and I will return to my normal mood of decisive optimism.

By the end of May, Massoud was preparing to re-establish several mujahideen bases in the Panjsher and return to the valley himself with more forces. He gathered his commanders at a meeting in Dahane, a village in the district of Khost-i-Fereng, described in a diary entry dated 24 May. The first infiltration was entrusted to one of his toughest fighters, Commander Aman.

He is God
3.3.1363
[24.5.1984]

Previously I had informed Gulza Khan that all the commanders of the Panjsher should meet in Dahane, so that I could discuss with them various matters including the return of armed units to the Panjsher. That evening, in the house of Abdul Hai Khan, all our fellow mujahideen except for three commanders discussed and inquired into the whole course of the fighting, and drew conclusions about what had gone well and what had gone wrong. All agreed with my opinion that we had actually won this campaign, and that the enemy had failed to achieve their objectives. We then discussed the matter of the return of armed units to the Panjsher, and I asked each of them their opinion on this matter. After the discussion, it was decided that this plan should be carried out, and that the first step would be to entrust Commander Aman with one unit of ten mujahideen, and that they should re-enter the upper Panjsher via Pushghuri Bola, and, after studying conditions there and finding out exactly what was going on, they should inform us of the situation, and then we would take a decision. It was also decided that until the commanders' messages reached us, especially Commander Aman's, others would have the responsibility for getting information about the conditions in Parandeh and Arzu, and should send us this information.

So, when we were fully informed about the situation all round, we could then take an informed

decision. The other decision we agreed on was that all the bases should be responsible for getting ready to return to the Panjsher, and should be prepared to start fighting again, so that, with God's assistance, with fighting all over the area, our enemies would be concentrating on several different fronts and would not be able to bring undue pressure to bear on one area only.

Massoud's focus was not only on military operations but also on logistics and support for the civilian population.

God is One
Pashaye Village of Khost
11.3.1363
[1.6.1984]
1:20 p.m.

Today the decision has been taken that, trusting in God, after lunch and noon prayers we will go to the pass of Darwaza, and that way we will enter the Panjsher.[7] In total we have approximately 130 people with us on this journey. There are three units that are armed, one mobile unit and two strike units, from Khenj and from the 2nd Unit. Several dozen of them are armed and are always with us. There are some prisoners as well and some unarmed people. I hope and trust in God that, God willing, we will reach Khawak tonight, and once we have reassured ourselves of communication with Dasht-i-Rewat, we will go down to the lower valley. Any further decisions will await our study of conditions in the area.

Ahead of me, all the other units have already left for the Panjsher – only the two Safed Chehir units remain, and those will leave tonight via the pass of Parandeh and, God willing, will enter the Panjsher tonight. About ten to twenty armed mujahideen of Dasht-i-Rewat are in the area because of family commitments, but they are scattered around; they are not together. All the others were in the northern areas and have left to come back to their homes.

According to the information provided by Azamuddin, the conditions in the Panjsher bases are fairly good, and there is no cause for worry. Other information tells me that the enemy below Parachiman and below Do Ab have established themselves facing the valley. The enemy outposts have not been moved very high up the mountain – only in Parandeh and Jamalwarda.

My main responsibilities on this journey, once I have entered the Panjsher, will probably be as follows:

1. Gathering, by reconnaissance, precise information about the enemy: its plans, arrangements and so on;
2. Making a thorough inquiry into the units and our supply lines, and examining the precise number of our armed individuals, the exact types of our weapons, our military supplies and ammunition, our food, and general conditions in the area;
3. Supplying and establishing fighting units, and making sure that they have contact by radio between themselves;
4. Preparing our brothers of the north, especially of the Salang, for the beginning of a united front to fight together;

5. Trusting in the unending and never-diminishing power of God to begin the fight.

This is the plan, and these are the responsibilities and duties that must be carried out.

Massoud was finally able to set up radio communications between units in the Panjsher, and between himself and his party headquarters in Peshawar. The radios used were presumably the long-awaited British-supplied ones that he was promised by MI6 in 1980.

One other piece of good news is that, after this, now that the manuals for the radios have finally arrived in Nahrin, I will be able to be in touch by radio with Peshawar on a daily basis. From now on, since these radio sets and the other radio sets are ready to be transported from Peshawar, I will be able, more easily and more rapidly, to have contact with all the different areas. I will be able to carry out my work much more rapidly, and will be able to have oversight of all conditions and events. There are three other radio sets in Pakistan, which are ready to be transported to the Panjsher.

Each of our bases now has a small radio set. They can, with a little bit of work and effort, all be in touch with each other. It is still early in the year, and the passes are only just beginning to open. God willing, we will be able to supply ourselves easily.

The conditions of our contact and communications with Nijrab and the Kohistan are good. Hisb-i-Islami in Kohistan is not going to create any problems, and if the enemy attacks Khost, we will still be able to supply ourselves with food from our bases in Shomali, Kohistan, and Nuristan, and we will be able to supply our military needs as well. I must also mention that all these supplies depend entirely on having sufficient help from the Jamiat headquarters in Pakistan, and sufficient money too. If Professor Rabbani and our other brothers in the Pakistan shura pay attention to this matter, our shortfall in supplies should be corrected imminently. The role of the radios in carrying out this work is something I must never forget, and I must make proper use of this means of communication.

Massoud was acutely aware of how the lack of communication and assistance from Peshawar had hampered his operations. The plight of the civilian population displaced by the war from their homes in the Panjsher Valley had become an overwhelming burden and a contributing factor in the defeat in Khost-i-Fereng, yet he had struggled to bring it to the notice of the political leaders in Peshawar.

The principal difficulty that I have currently is our civilian exiles. We have about 100,000 people who have been displaced, and they are living in extremely straitened circumstances. I do not have very much information about those who have gone to live in Kabul or other provinces, but those who have left as exiles from the Panjsher and have gone to live temporarily in Khost and in the areas of the north are living in really reduced and straitened circumstances, especially the exiles in Khost who have the greatest difficulty and are reduced to a pitiable condition. The locals really do not like them – in fact, they hate them and do not help them in any way; they oppress our exiles and make them

suffer and drive them out of their villages. Unfortunately, we do not have access to sufficient money to give any effective help to the exiles, and there is no proper organisation in Khost which would prevent the locals from carrying out these hateful activities against our brother exiles.

The following contributed to this unhappy condition. The defeat of the mujahideen in Khost, and the fact that the mujahideen of the Panjsher did not fight has made the local people more ready to refuse to help the civilian exiles from the Panjsher. In addition, the propaganda leaflets circulated by the Russian enemy say that the Russians have no problem with the local people, but demand that they expel the Panjsheris from their areas. The fact that the bombing happens at the same time as these propaganda leaflets are distributed has really separated, or driven a wedge between, us and the local people, who consider us Panjsheris as being the principal reason for them being bombed and killed. A lot of the trouble in these extremely difficult current conditions is also due to the commander of Baghlan, Abdul Hai. He has really whipped up this anti-Panjsheri frenzy in these really terrible current times – as has the arrival of Juma Khan and his forces in the Andarab Valley. He has come on the pretext of expelling the Panjsheris from his area and driving them away as outsiders. Isn't it strange that for him the Russians are friends, and the outsiders and enemies are us, the Panjsheris?

In June 1984, Massoud received information that the Russians were preparing a new attack. The plan was discussed at a government meeting on 22 June: 18,000 soldiers would attack from the base of the valley, combined with a surprise attack from the north through the Parandeh, Anaba, and Khawak side valleys, and 30,000 fresh Russian troops would be deployed from Bagram Air Base. 'This report makes it clear that the Russians are determined, God forbid, to annihilate the Panjsher by any and all means possible. It also makes clear that the enemy's seventh attack failed to crush the mujahideen, and that they are determined to achieve this with an eighth attack,' Massoud wrote. The offensive lasted ten days, from 5–15 July,[8] and 'ended with their decisive failure'. He described bloody fighting around the villages of the upper Panjsher, as relays of helicopters dropped paratroopers in the mountains above the mujahideen positions to cut off their escape routes. The wider aim was to enforce a siege of the whole area:

The Russians, intending to lure the mujahideen into a trap, landed paratroopers on the track between Marghi and Parandeh, and started attacking from below, hoping to push the mujahideen into the trap and there, God forbid, strike them an annihilating blow. The mujahideen fought back obstinately and, in the course of the struggle, sent some two hundred Russians to Hell. Eventually, hunger made it increasingly difficult for them to continue resisting, so they retreated, each independently, and about thirty of them crossed the Khaniz bridge into Talkha. I spent the evening talking with them.

Even as he described the victories, Massoud recorded the less glorious

happenings:

> The commander of Astana sent a group of seven to eight mujahideen prisoners under guard to me, accusing them of disobedience, smoking hashish, and drinking alcohol, even adding that they were spoilers and government agents. From the beginning, this group did not have good relations with their commander, and to a certain extent their behaviour has been unbalanced. In this case, I'm not sure what to do with them!

In a later entry, he sums up the fighting that summer:

> He is God
> Jarwish
> 16.7.1363
> [8.10.1984]
>
> In order to avenge their defeat in the seventh attack, the Russians decided this time to continue their campaign in the Panjsher for about four months, to exhaust our supply of ammunition and wear out our mujahideen. To this end, they also cut off our supply routes and established military posts towards Andarab and Bulghin to encircle us.
>
> With the five military posts they now had inside the valley itself, the enemy was in a stronger position than during the seventh attack.
>
> During the campaign, the Russians, in order to prevent our escape or strategic withdrawal, landed their commando forces to attack neighbouring areas such as Khost, Andarab, the mountainous area of Kohistan, Najrao, and even Laghman.
>
> Within the Panjsher Valley, the enemy landed commandos on the first day in Dasht-i-Rewat, above Safed Chehir, and began attacking all the [mujahideen] bases at more or less the same time. Helicopters landed commandos at Abdullah Khel and Dara Hazara.
>
> By God's grace, our mujahideen resisted with greater determination and stamina than could have been expected, notably in Khenj and the valley of Abdullah Khel. They fought well against the enemy in Dahane Pawat and Eshkashu. There were several armed encounters between our mujahideen and enemy troops in Khenj, where some 500 enemy soldiers were killed or wounded; four helicopters were brought down by our Dashaka fire; and several tanks and lorries were destroyed. Our mujahideen also captured as booty a large new rocket of as-yet-unknown design, one PK, and six guns of Kalakov, Diktarov, and Kranikov [sic] design.

In the ten-day operation, 1,860 Russians were killed and 4,000 wounded, and Afghan government forces lost 400 men with 700 to 900 being wounded, Massoud records, citing his intelligence sources.

> By God's grace, this second attack of the enemy during the current year has been utterly disastrous for the enemy, 100 per cent so, and they have been resoundingly defeated.

The number of mujahideen lost amounts to a total of thirteen. But the material damage is considerable, and the Russians are burning down any remaining houses.

Our mujahideen’s morale remains as strong after this eighth attack as it was before.

10

The Russian Perspective

Soviet intelligence calculated that Massoud had used the ceasefire of 1983–4 to build up his forces to 3,500 men. Some 500 were defending the entrance to the valley and another 2,000 were operating against Soviet and Afghan government garrisons. The remainder were in the north-east part of the valley, and their task was to ward off airborne landings.[1] Under pressure from the Kabul government, which was angry at the ceasefires, the Russians decided to deal with him 'once and for all', according to Rodric Braithwaite, the former British ambassador to Moscow.[2] To do so, they deployed 11,000 Soviet and 2,600 Afghan troops, plus 200 aircraft and 190 helicopters.

Spetsnaz (Russian special forces) went into the Panjsher Valley first and found the mujahideen positions empty. But they decided not to call off the operation because their bombers – carrying cluster as well as high explosive bombs, the biggest weighing 9,000 kg – had already taken off from their bases in the Soviet Union. The air strike lasted about two hours and then, preceded by sappers, the main ground force moved in at 4 p.m. on 19 April.

Eleven days later, on 30 April, the 2nd Battalion of the 62nd Motor-Rifle Regiment was ambushed 'thanks to the carelessness of the regimental commander, who had ordered it to advance into a ravine leading off the valley, without first securing the [high ground above it]'.[3] At first, the Russians met no resistance, but when the battalion lowered its guard it was promptly ambushed. In the battle that followed, the battalion lost fifty-three people, including twelve officers, and fifty-eight were wounded. One of the soldiers present, Private Nikolai Knyazev, described the aftermath:

My platoon was guarding the regimental command post when we heard a sudden commotion, and the regimental commander told us that one of our battalions had been attacked, and that there were wounded and dead.

We loaded stretchers on to our armoured vehicles and started up the ravine. After waiting for darkness, we continued on foot. There were about ten of us together with the platoon commander. It was not easy to make our way along the mountain paths and it took us a long time since there were boulders and terraces everywhere, which made it difficult to work out the distance we had covered. We seemed to be marching for eternity.

After a while we saw a strange light shining in the darkness and the platoon commander ordered us to lie down; but we soon worked out that it was light shining through the periscopes of a BMP [infantry fighting vehicle]. We had barely moved any distance further when we were fired on by a Kalashnikov. Our platoon commander, Lieutenant Arutiunov, fired a rocket, we shouted out, and the firing stopped. We came up close. It was one of our own BMPs, which had been blown up by a mine. The driver and the deputy political officer of the battalion, Major Kononenko, had remained with the vehicle, both suffering from concussion. We moved forward. After a little while we met the *razvedchiki* [scouts] who had been sent ahead of us. They were carrying some dead bodies, including the body of the battalion commander, Captain Korolev. Everybody sobered up in a moment.

It was already getting light … as we arrived at a *kishlak* [small summer encampment]. As we went down the main street, we heard the sound of motors. Two of the battalion's BMPs were moving towards us. They were loaded down with the bodies of dead soldiers. Arms and legs stuck out of the pile in different directions. Smashed-up radios and rocket launchers were piled up as well. A group of soldiers who had survived the battle were walking behind the armoured vehicles. It was terrible to look at their faces. They were finished, they expressed no emotion, they were like zombies.

We brought the survivors back to the main body of the regiment. A helicopter landed nearby and some generals emerged. One of them ordered the surviving soldiers to form up. They had not yet pulled themselves together and still smelled of corpses – they had been lying among the dead for days (I can't even imagine what had gone on in their heads). One of the visitors came up to them and shouted, 'Bastards! Wankers! You're standing here, you bastards, and your comrades are lying out there! Why are you here?!' – that's how he addressed them. Then he read them the Riot Act and left with the feeling that he had done his duty. The lads stood silent and unfeeling – perhaps they did not even hear him.

That evening we were ordered to return to the scene of the action and bring back the remaining bodies. Imagine an open area about a hundred metres square. A river runs through the middle. On the right-hand side there is a level place, a few terraces and a hill about two or three hundred metres high. To the left of the river there is a path, an overhanging wall of rock on one side and on the other a sheer drop into the river.

It was immediately clear we were in the right place. There was a heavy smell of corpses – the boys had been lying there for nearly two days, and at that time of year it is already getting hot. We were very much afraid that the rebels were waiting for someone to come to collect the bodies and that we too would end up lying there. We made our way to the foot of the hill, to the terraces. First we came across the body of a sergeant who was due to be demobilised: he had lost his legs either from an explosion or a burst of heavy machine-gun fire. Five or six of the lads were lying piled up in a natural

cave on the terrace. They had been cut down either by a machine-gun burst or when the rebels had started to throw hand grenades. So there they lay together where death had caught up with them. We took the bodies across the river mechanically, as if we were asleep. The sight of the bodies was terrible.

There were rags of something hanging on a tree and below it a mess. Evidently a bullet had hit a mine that one of the soldiers had been carrying.

Suddenly we heard a weak groan some distance off from the hollow, by the rocks. We carefully went towards the noise and came across a soldier who was still alive. His shin had been shot off and was hanging by rags of tendon. He was weakened by loss of blood, but he had managed to put a tourniquet round his leg and stem the flow. We gave him first aid and took him to the vehicles. He survived. There were no weapons left; they had all been collected by the rebels.

On the morning of 2 May we returned to the regimental armoured group. The bodies were lying on a stony beach in rows. There were about fifty of them. We were told that some had already been taken away. Our company commander, Lieutenant Kurdiuk, was lying on his back with his elbows bent and his fists clenched, and across his chest you could see a line of bullet holes. It was said that he had been shot by the Afghan soldiers who were marching with the battalion when they started to desert to the rebels, but he had time to order the lads to fire on them.[4]

One Russian officer, Captain Khabarov, never got over his bitterness at the way these operations were conducted:

Why did we leave the Panjsher so quickly? What was the point of the operation? Throughout the whole of that war practically every operation ended in the same way. Military operations began, soldiers and officers died, Afghan soldiers died, the mujahideen and the peaceful population died, and when the operation was over, our forces would leave, and everything would return to what it had been before. I still feel guilty and bitter about the Afghan government forces … whom we betrayed and sold down the river when we left Afghanistan, leaving them and their families to the mercy of the victors.[5]

Braithwaite wrote:

The sledgehammer blows were incapable of cracking the nut of an elusive, uncoordinated guerrilla enemy. These operations usually succeeded in their immediate objectives. The garrison would be relieved, the base would be destroyed, the valley occupied. But the Russians never had sufficient troops to hold the ground they took. After a successful operation they would withdraw to their bases and hand responsibility to their Afghan allies. But the government's military and civilian representatives found it impossible to operate amid a hostile population. Too often, under moral and military pressure from the mujahideen, they abandoned their posts, deserted, or went over to the enemy.

And so the Russians discovered, as other armies have discovered in Afghanistan before and since, that once you have taken the ground you need troops to hold it. They might dominate the towns and the villages by day. But the mujahideen would rule them by night. They never broke the rebels' grip on the countryside or closed the frontier through which the rebels received their supplies.

> In the end the Russians had good tactics but no workable strategy. They could win their fights, but they could not convincingly win the war. Their best efforts, military and political, went for nothing. They eventually had no choice but to disentangle themselves as best they could.[6]

There was no doubt at the time that the Soviet army was taking heavy casualties in the war and was resorting to heavy bombardment to suppress the Afghan resistance, but this first-hand account from a Russian soldier reveals the scale of the Soviet difficulties and the true toll that Massoud’s mujahideen inflicted on the Russian superpower.

11

A Winter Offensive

With the June onslaught barely over, Massoud was already planning to go on the offensive. He headed up the valley to rally fighters for an attack on the government garrison at Pushghur, but found many of them preparing to leave the valley ahead of the winter. Families were in dire economic straits and feared a winter attack, which would be particularly hard to bear in the cold months – and retreat would be impossible once the passes were blocked by snow. Sure enough, as Massoud wrote in his diary, the Russians launched another offensive at the end of October:

> The enemy attacked the Panjsher for the ninth time on 4 Aqrab [26 October].[1] The fighting lasted about ten days, in bad conditions due to the weather. On the first day, the enemy landed over 100 helicopters with troops in the Abdullah Khel side valley; at the same time, they started attacking our bases on the shady side of the valley from Manjhur to Faraj. And at the same moment, the Russians attacked ——[2] and the mountainous area of Kohistan, and brought pressure to bear from behind on the shady-side bases. After a few days' fighting, the enemy started attacking the sunny-side bases, and the Russians advanced on Shotol, Tawakh, Jamalwarda, and Karbashi.
>
> The losses among our mujahideen were negligible, thank God! And we managed to take from the enemy as booty altogether some forty pieces of small arms and guns of various types.

Yet he noted that a military convoy had made its way through to the government base at Pushghur, and the Russian troops were showing no sign of withdrawing to the lower end of the valley, as they usually did at the onset of the cold weather.

> From this military activity and resupply, it has become clear that the Russians are determined to keep the national troops at Pushghur throughout the winter, and so too at their other bases.

Now that Pushghur has dug in for the winter, our difficulties with resupply etc. are greatly increased, especially as winter is imminent and already the mountains are white with snow.

Intelligence reports make it known that the enemy plans, during the course of this year's winter, to mount large-scale and wide-ranging attacks across the whole of Afghanistan and especially the north. They intend to initiate the attack on the north on 15 Qaus [6 December];[3] the enemy troops have been busy building bases and will therefore remain in the area until the end of the year. It adds to our troubles that this year's armed conflict with the Russians has left the plains north of Kabul [in the Shomali Plain] relatively undisturbed. Another piece of bad luck which has been reported is that Jamiat groups in Do Ab in Andarab have just now decided to fight each other. Dr Dastagir, general commander of the area, and Amanullah, the commander of Jebal Seraj, have both been killed by Salam, who is allied to Shamseddin and is a Russian stooge.

During the course of the winter, the enemy will also attack the Panjsher, which will be another serious problem for us.

I am saddened to have to record that my only hope is in God; I have no conceivable hope of help from the in-country political parties, nor from the political leaders in Peshawar. Even though I have sent urgent messages to Peshawar forewarning them of the enemy's intended winter attack, I have come to realise that there is not one person there who will give even a moment's thought to how to resolve this problem, or who might have the faintest idea of what to do![4]

Thank God, we have no shortage of military supplies, but our economic difficulties continue as they were, even though we did distribute 90 lakh afghanis a few days ago.[5]

The time of wishing for a ceasefire has gone, and the preparations for a meeting of the northern areas, which I intend should play a major role in our affairs, have been postponed; this has caused people to bring back their families once again into the Panjsher, which will add to our difficulties during a winter campaign.

A few days later he learned the worst: the Russians were indeed planning another assault on the Panjsher in the depths of winter.

When I heard, two days ago and again yesterday, of the enemy's winter offensive, I felt a bitter despair; my heart sank with a heavy sorrow, I had no stomach for talking or studying, and I was utterly puzzled as to what to do: to fight in the valley, or to fall back, neither option free of serious dangers and difficulties, each requiring effort and hard work.

However, after a while, my depression lifted, and it was as if there were no enemy offensive to consider. I think that the reason why grief and difficulties cannot throw me down or keep me down is because I have faith in God's power, I am sure that the path I have chosen is the right one, and I am prepared to accept death – for, at every moment, this life is full of sadness, and it is better by far to die in a just cause. It is only awareness of sin that makes me fear death, otherwise I have no particular enthusiasm for this life; if God is merciful and grants forgiveness, I neither have any fear nor feel any terror.

When I cease to exist, what will happen then? That is a matter for God, for He created the earth

and the heavens, He takes the decisions, no one understands better than He does, so we must be content with His decrees.

He is God
Pushghur
23.8.1363
[13.11.1984]

On the eve of 22 Aqrab [13 November], it was decided that I should come to Pushghur and organise the attack so that, God willing, within a ten-day campaign, the enemy base at Pushghur should be destroyed.

Yesterday, I examined an area from which the outposts and main base at Pushghur could clearly be observed. In the course of this visit, I reproached myself for not coming earlier to see this area in detail for myself, purely out of lethargy!

Now I can see that the positioning of the enemy bases, with other security considerations, is favourable for our planned attacks. I am utterly convinced that, God willing, within ten days, Pushghur base will be occupied by us!

It was 4:30 a.m. when the commander woke me up with a message from Lieutenant Khalil transmitted by radio, and in the message I read what I had feared might happen: 'the Russians are about to attack'! This is what I always feared might happen in winter. According to the intelligence report, 30,000 Russian soldiers, who have been specially trained over a long period at Pul-i-Charki for military action in the Panjsher, are about to attack the Panjsher in the next two or three days.

This will no doubt be the last enemy attack on the Panjsher in the current year. Another misfortune is that our bases are insufficiently supplied with food; everywhere is covered in snow, the air is chill, many of the refugees have returned to the area with no provisions, and the military supplies of many of our bases have not yet been transported thither – they have mostly arrived recently from Chitral, and are all lying scattered in various places.

There is no doubt that, to all appearances, we are facing extraordinary difficulties and misfortunes.

Nevertheless, I emphatically have a clear hope that, as God has been favourable to us till now and has granted us victory even in the most difficult circumstances, so, if He wishes, He will once again Himself intervene, out of His extreme mercifulness, to resolve these present difficulties. Besides, we poor creatures do not understand what is best for us; our salvation lies entirely in God's hands. So, we should resign ourselves to what the Almighty decrees for us: as it says in the Koran, 'Sometimes you shy away from something which is in fact good for you; sometimes you run after something which is actually harmful for you!'

As military commander, Massoud was also ultimately responsible for the civilian population, who were sometimes in a desperate situation, as the next entry shows.

He is God
Pushghur

5–6.9.1363
[25–26.11.1984]

A few days ago, I went to Safed Chehir and arranged a meeting with a number of brothers-in-Islam to discuss the winter campaign of the enemy. In this meeting, after much discussion, we agreed to act as follows: before the weather grows worse, and before the enemy attacks, it would be best to persuade the civilians once again to leave the Panjsher. Even if it is no easy matter to expel the civilians and to have to explain this decision and strategy to them, what other choice is there? If the enemy were to carry out a broad-based attack during the winter, no one could guarantee what might happen: would it be possible to defend civilians against the Russians in such conditions? After all, by reason of snow and freezing air, it will no longer be possible for civilians to take refuge in the mountains.

It was agreed in the meeting that a number of more canny and experienced brothers should go to the bases at Khenj, Safed Chehir, and Dasht-i-Rewat and discuss this matter with locals and refugees from other bases, and distribute a fistful of cash to ease their difficulties – 3,000 afghanis per family.

With regard to those families who are too poor to even think about emigrating, we decided to lodge them in the narrow defiles of the passes of Khawak, Parian, and Ariw.

With regard to the civilians of Parian and Dara Hazara, we decided to lodge them in their own areas.

Luckily, as we were taking these decisions, Asadullah arrived from Peshawar with 120 lakh afghanis, which, together with the previous sum of 90 lakh afghanis, was immediately sent for distribution to the bases and to those civilians who once again were forced into exile.

This announcement of a second exile was very hard for people to accept, for most had expected a ceasefire to be brokered – and I had encouraged people to think so! May God reward these people in this life and the next, for once again they obeyed orders and prepared to emigrate. Some families who had been insulted by communists in Kabul would have rather died than emigrate yet again.

Unfortunately, the number of families was greater than I could count or guess, and the money ran out, especially in Dasht-i-Rewat, so I was forced to borrow, and I became indebted to the tune of some 500,000 afghanis to a handful of rich Parianis who had come to see me – even this amount was not to be enough.

The chill air and steep paths up the passes made it very difficult to distribute the military and other supplies that had just arrived from Peshawar. If the military supplies are all concentrated in one or two places, they will certainly be destroyed during an attack. So, I have tried to distribute them as widely as possible, and I hope to be able to finish the distribution to different bases before the enemy attacks.

The existence of this base at Pushghur has allowed the enemy to be positioned in such a way as to maximise inconvenience for us, for otherwise we could easily pass to and from the second administrative division. If the bases at Pushghur and Do Ab weren’t there, our troubles would be greatly reduced.

I have therefore decided that, this time, whatever it takes, and with God’s help, I shall either occupy the base at Pushghur or force them to flee. I am convinced that, if Pushghur retreats, the enemy will not be able to maintain its bases at Do Ab, Baharak, or Bazarak, and will have to regroup in Rokha.

For this purpose, I have come to Pushghur and I am currently organising the attack, which will be

in four stages:
1. Cutting off supply routes, both by land and by air;
2. Military action to occupy the mountaintop outposts;
3. Simultaneously with the above, putting pressure on Pushghur;
4. Attacking Pushghur.

We are now moving to occupy the outpost of Sar Mazar, which we failed to do in the last military action.

He recorded with precision his calculation of the strength of the enemy in the base at Pushghur – an army battalion and a unit of military gendarmes, approximately 300–400 men – and lists their equipment, from tanks to heavy artillery and mortars, and details their defences.

The enemy has established a defensive ring of a total of seven outposts on the mountaintops; these are further strengthened with covered drystone breastworks and anti-personnel mines.

In my opinion, God willing, taking this outpost will not be difficult, as we now have experience in confronting the enemy's mines and know how to defuse them. For one thing, the morale of the enemy soldiers is weak and, with a few more blows, it will be further weakened; in addition, a majority of the soldiers are not prepared to serve.

He is God

The campaign around Pushghur is progressing well and successfully. On the [date illegible], after a day of fruitlessly waiting in ambush, our brothers' efforts and pains and going without sleep finally paid off: the enemy, who wanted to resupply the outposts of Khwaja Kalan and Saulanak, fell into the ambush. The point where the soldiers came down from the outposts above, to meet the soldiers from the base below to receive fresh supplies, had earlier been strewn with mines. One of our groups was detailed to watch for the approach of the soldiers to their accustomed meeting place and to explode the mines as soon as they arrived; another group was responsible for preventing the soldiers from escaping back to the outposts above; our third group had the task of occupying, if possible, the outpost of Saulanak. On the right side, one Dashaka was placed, and, on the left, one Dashaka with a PK, and a few mujahideen with light arms had taken up positions to block any escape routes for the soldiers.

Meanwhile, I was watching from further away to catch sight of the soldiers bringing up supplies from below, to catch the moment their heads should appear; my heart leapt, and I wanted only for the enemy to arrive. The day had just begun to dawn, and I had almost given up hope of the enemy coming, when suddenly I spotted through my binoculars two soldiers slowly toiling up. I made my brothers aware of the approach of the soldiers; all of them at once tried to spot the soldiers, my binoculars were passed from hand to hand, they were all overjoyed and alert and anxious. The main part of the group started walking up from behind the hill. They walked one behind the other in single file.

The minutes passed sluggishly. We listened out attentively, nerves stretched to catch the sound of

the explosion: suddenly, the awesome sound of the two anti-tank mines and several rockets exploding filled the air, closely followed by the clatter of light arms fire. The action had begun.

I tried moment by moment to call up radio bases 10, 20, and 30 – especially base 10, which had the responsibility for mortars, and also to put pressure on the outpost of Khwaja Kalan. Radio base 10 was silent.

Radio base 20 reported back on the progress of the brothers to take the outpost of Saulanak, as it had the responsibility of putting pressure on Saulanak with cannon fire; it had only succeeded in firing two rounds. They failed to hit the mark, as the cannon had been damaged, and when it was necessary to fix the rear plate it spontaneously made a noise.

Radio base 30 reported back on the successful explosion and the approach of our men to the outpost at Saulanak; it was responsible for occupying that outpost. Base 30 complained of that outpost's resistance and the poor condition of the cannon, and also complained that it was under pressure from the Do Gusha outpost and from the main base of the enemy forces: my orders and guidance were sought. As I did not consider conditions favourable for an attack, I told them that if such were not possible, then they should retreat.

Qari Saheb, the commander for the attack, replied that he had taken a decision to occupy the outpost, happen what may!

A short while later, base 30 reported back that the outpost had been taken and occupied; two of the soldiers had fled to the Sar-e Ziyarat outpost. The brothers had entered the outpost, and I was reassured on that point.

He is God
Mukni, Safed Chehir
20.9.1363
[10.12.1984]

I give praise to God that, in these days, we have been favoured by success and everything is turning out as we could wish. The fighting is being carried on successfully around Pushghur and in other sectors of the Panjsher. In the last few days, we were able to occupy the outposts of Do Gusha and another on the shady side of the valley; the outpost of Sar-e Ziyarat was forced to flee after a few days' siege.

He listed the weapons and three radio sets seized, and went on:

Alas, during one action, our experienced commander Haji Saheb Mohammad Amin was hit by a heavy artillery shell and was martyred. Haji Saheb, after unequalled leadership and guidance, and after occupying one of the enemy outposts almost single-handedly and killing many soldiers inside the outpost, was martyred on Friday afternoon. The news of his death turned our momentary rejoicing at the capture of the outpost into boundless grief. I had just taken my evening meal, and was busy talking to the brothers, when suddenly Commander Mirza entered the bunker. I could read it all from

the expression of his face: he sat down next to me and, softly, with a choking voice, said, ‘Haji is dead, martyred!’

I listened calmly, as I have a habit of strange endurance when first hearing bad news. The others guessed from our tête-à-tête that something was amiss. In order to prevent an outburst of panic, I told them that Haji had been wounded in the thigh, but they had already understood the truth from Commander Mirza’s expression of consternation.

The hours passed with some difficulty. Martyr Haji’s corpse had remained where he had been killed. Our mujahideen had lost their morale, and asked my guidance as to what to do, so I instructed them to, if possible, remove the ammunition and blow up the place using dynamite or anti-tank mines, and I also told them to call in the help of Mohammad Shafa, commander of Shaba, with ten of his men.

After consultation, I sent Commander Amruddin to Jurak that same night, and it was decided that the mobile unit should also be sent thither.

We were all saddened by Haji’s death. The next day, I too felt the effect of that sad event, and was unable to stop seeing Haji’s cheerful smiling face – in the last two or three months, he had really found his way into our affections. Haji was exemplary in fighting the Russians, in his treatment of his mujahideen, even in the way he was martyred while leading the attack on and occupation of the outposts. With me, Haji, in spite of scoldings, remained always impeccably polite. In current circumstances, his is an irreparable loss.

Massoud stayed another night to boost morale, and then took a bath in Safed Chehir and set off to a long-planned meeting with more than twenty commanders who had travelled from provinces across the north to see him. He set much store by the Commanders’ Council, through which he aimed to unify the guerrilla actions of Jamiat-i-Islami and so expand the strategic reach of the group. Massoud described his introductory words to the meeting thus: ‘I threw light on current developments in a wider context, and divided my speech into sections dealing with Jamiat’s internal and external affairs, going into detail about internal difficulties and sketching out a way of resolving differences and problems by creating mutual good understanding in just such council meetings.’ He appointed four members to the council, and they discussed establishing more bases, setting up a council to oversee matters for the bases, and carrying out unified pre-emptive attacks during the winter to render ineffective the enemy’s winter offensive. ‘After the joint meeting,’ Massoud recalled, ‘I had private sessions individually with each of the brothers from Takhar, Qunduz, and Khost, and, as far as we could, relieved their difficulties. The meetings ended positively.’

Fierce fighting continued around Pushghur as the Soviet troops retaliated and

recaptured several outposts, but they had abandoned their plan for a prolonged large-scale offensive and suddenly relayed a request for a ceasefire. Massoud reflected on the motivations of the enemy and the pros and cons of a truce for himself:

After fierce fighting in 1361 [1982], the enemy was compelled to propose a ceasefire. Then, the leadership changed in the Soviet Union, and the enemy no longer thought a ceasefire advantageous to their interests, and started armed hostilities again. When their plans proved to be sketched on water, they were undecided whether to continue fighting or again offer a ceasefire. They eventually decided that continuing the fight was more advantageous to themselves, until once again they were disappointed, and again they proposed a ceasefire. Again, they broke the ceasefire and made plans for a winter offensive.

When I received intelligence of their planned winter offensive, I told the 20 per cent of civilians who had made their way back into the valley to once again go into exile out of the valley. I made ready to face the winter offensive, and at the same time I greatly increased the military pressure on Pushghur.

The enemy found out that we had taken defensive measures, and promptly abandoned their plan of attack; yet again, they had come to the conclusion that continued fighting in the Panjsher was just not advantageous to them – so, yet again, they proposed a ceasefire.

Now I ask myself the question: what advantage does the enemy see in this ceasefire? And of what benefit will it be to us? It would be better to be quite clear: now that the enemy has been defeated, why should we ever accept a ceasefire?

Massoud starts a fresh page.

He is God

Why are we ready to accept a ceasefire when we know that the enemy has failed and been defeated?

In order to explain this, it must be stated that final victory over the Russians will be possible only when we follow the successive stages of war one after the other, according to the science of armed struggle; that is, victory will come to us only when we successfully follow the stages of war, according to our strategy, one after the other.

Our plan for achieving victory can briefly be presented in the following stages:

1. Start the fighting with a group numbering between thirty and eighty men;
2. Create bases;
3. Organise a central army;
4. General mobilisation.

This is the only reasonable plan, the stages of which we have to establish, step by step, while paying attention to the specificity of our own situation.

In our opinion, victory over the enemy cannot be imagined in terms of one or two bases, nor will the enemy face total defeat merely because of some military defeats on one or two fronts.

Therefore, what is most urgent for us is to complete each stage of the war; any fighting that leads to

no result if prolonged – or rather, any fighting that does not help us to reach our medium-term objectives – is of no use to us. Or rather, every campaign must be evaluated in terms of its contribution to reaching our goal.

Now, this question must be answered: is the current fighting in the Panjsher producing a result or not?

In my opinion, our fighting this year damaged but also helped our prospects of reaching our intermediate goals, and has smoothed our path in a way that could not have been imagined in advance. We must profit from the circumstances that this fighting has so favourably prepared for us. In this respect, continuing the fighting will not only deprive us of the favourable conditions that have been brought about but also contribute to a weakening of our bases.

Today, all the inhabitants of the Panjsher – who number some one hundred thousand – have left their home areas as exiles and, if this exile continues, the Panjsher will without doubt be an utter ruin after one more year; also, a great proportion of these people will become exiles on a more permanent basis, either abroad or in different parts of the country.

Thus, also, the mujahideen who mostly have families and domestic responsibilities will gradually abandon the bases and consider it pointless to prolong resistance.

In such circumstances, failure will be our lot, God forbid!

Also, if we are engaged in fighting the enemy, we will be unable to continue developing bases and will face serious problems, as can already be seen; rival political parties, with no understanding or capacity for work, with their stupid and immature ways of thinking, and with their continual infighting, will have a greater role in weakening us than that played by our initial enemy, and they will prepare the ground for the victory of our principal enemy, the Russians. With the continuation of armed conflict, we will find ourselves in a very dangerous situation in which, unless God helps us, we will in the long term inevitably collapse and fail.

Another question comes to mind here: is ours the only front in Afghanistan that is fighting? And if our front collapses, will that entail the collapse of all resistance throughout the country?

We should answer as follows.

No, we are not the only ones who are fighting, nor were we the first to fight, nor would all the resistance movement immediately collapse if we were to fail. However, there is no other political party nor grouping nor military front, other than ours, that has any plan of action.

As experience has shown, and as we can see with our own eyes, most military fronts are in the process of disintegrating; political parties and military fronts have no independent plans, and their party leaders are utterly unaware of the scientific principles of armed struggle – to such a degree that no one who did not know them could imagine the extent of their ignorance!

I know most of them and, having seen their work, now well understand that these people are not the ones to resist the Russians for any length of time, nor are they capable of leadership in this struggle. Therefore, if we – God forbid – should fail and collapse, all the others – if not in the short term, certainly in the long term – will also fail and collapse.

On the basis of this analysis, we must be extremely attentive to our own movements and actions, and must not require from our troops, or impose on them, any actions or tasks that go beyond their capacities or endurance.

In brief:

For us, making our organisational plans progress is more important than fighting.

We must take advantage of any fighting that has so far taken place.

Once again, as in 1361 [1982], we need more time, time enough to carry out in practice, with God's help, all our programmes, and hasten the final defeat of the enemy.

He is God

The plans that we expect to carry out during the ceasefire, if God grants us success and a period of peace, are as follows:

1. Continuing building bases;
2. Settling the civilians in the Panjsher and strengthening the military front for another round of fighting;
3. Creating a central army;
4. Advancing the cultural struggle at a deep level;
5. Creating unity among the mujahideen, and rising above petty local quarrels;
6. Creating a strong central administration and political headquarters.

By 20 December, Massoud conceded that his attempt to seize the Pushghur base had not been successful – but it had provoked a ferocious Russian response and forestalled a wider offensive.

He is God
Mukni Valley
29.9.1363
[20.12.1984]

Our plan to attack the upper valley has not been successful, because of the sluggishness of the Khenj commander and an element of misunderstanding.

Enemy bombardments have greatly increased – such pressure around an outpost is unprecedented; for the first time, the enemy is bombing the villages behind the outpost by night, using aerial reconnaissance aircraft and jets.[6]

Massoud described a narrow escape from a volley of rockets from a multiple rocket launcher:

Last night, once again, God was merciful, and we survived the firing from enemy BM-21s … I left to go to the house of Kaka Musafid, who had been looking after me for the last few days, and I was hoping to drink some milk; I had got near the house when suddenly I sensed the flashing light of rockets exploding. I ordered the brothers to hit the ground. An explosion of some twenty rockets passed us; the brothers wanted to move, but I forbade them, and at that moment a second round of rocket fire reached us; everywhere was lit up by the repeated explosions of rockets. As the second round of rocket fire also came to an end, we ran towards the bridge at Safed Chehir, which has a cave

nearby; this we reached, and we wasted no time in going inside the narrow side valley.

This morning at breakfast time, we received the news that one officer who was held prisoner, in the charge of our explosives expert, had escaped while they were laying mines. This was disturbing news for all of us, as the prisoner was aware of my presence in Safed Chehir and had seen the room where I had been this morning. Tea had not yet been brought when the sound of aircraft was heard; I came out of the room to see the plane circling – it was circling threateningly low, obviously intent on bombing the nearby areas. I called out to the brothers to get out of the room, and myself moved to higher ground, a few steps above the room. Suddenly the plane veered and approached from directly opposite, and fired a rocket. I called out to all of them to lie down; luckily, it went wide of the mark and missed us – so we left the area as fast as we could, and distanced ourselves from the village.

He is God
Safed Chehir
Thursday, 30.9.1363
[20.12.1984]

For some days now, the sky has been clear, and there is no trace of last week's snowfall. Everyone loves a sunny sky but, in current circumstances, the enemy is taking advantage of clear skies to bomb us ever more fiercely; not a day passes without the Russians carrying out some hundred or more flights.

All these flights, and all this bombing, are for the sake of the government forces in the Pushghur base, which is currently besieged by the mujahideen.

Amid all the bombing, Massoud received yet another proposal for a cease-fire from the Russians, but he had long since given up on negotiations. He recounted with relish his reply to the intermediary: 'Tell the other side: You have no authority for such negotiations, so, in future, trouble us no more!'

In January 1985, the offensive was in its ninth month, and Massoud reflected on why the Russians were so intent on attacking the Panjsher.[7]

Almighty God
Khenj
21.10.1363
[10.1.1985]

The war this year has lasted exactly eight months and twenty-one days as of today, and still there is no end in sight and fighting continues in the valley. No one can remember such a long war in any part of the country, or in the Panjsher, and it is the first time that the Panjsher front is facing such a phenomenon.

The reason that we are facing such a problem is obvious! The enemy does not fear war, but fears a coordinated campaign. The Russians had experience of the Basmachis from Turkistan and other

regions, and uncoordinated fighting cannot last and will vanish when the war is prolonged.[8]

But they are scared of an enduring resistance that is capable of expansion, and they can clearly see such a war in the Panjsher. The Russians realise that, of all the regions, only the Panjsher is conducting a coordinated war and has the organisational capacity to fight a strategic war, and so, despite all difficulties, the enemy is looking to break the Panjsher front in order to prevent this front implementing its plans. Therefore, the number and length of attacks and mobilising forces are higher in proportion to those in other regions of Afghanistan.

With much of the terrain blanketed in snow, the Russians delayed their ground operations, but Massoud did not rest. He travelled up and down the valley and over high snowbound passes, mostly on foot, organising and directing fighters and communities. He sent twelve men off to Pakistan for officer training in a third country. The men would be trained to command 300 men each, he said. Then he turned his attention to a mujahideen base at Pitaab, near Pushghur, where 150 fighters were stationed but morale was poor. ‘The mujahideen are not listening to each other or their commanders,’ he wrote. ‘There is no esprit de corps among them; people’s possessions are being stolen, and ammunition and weapons are going missing. Few mujahideen care to risk their lives.’ The mujahideen and the community had received supplies from his central administration, but standards were poor, he wrote. ‘The wheat is mixed with sand; there is no oven to bake bread; the bread is cooked in a pan and inedible.’ He listed the causes, namely weak leadership and lack of discipline, but also factional divisions between parties in this part of the Panjsher. He decided to find fresh recruits. ‘The solution requires lots of patient, sound planning, teamwork, and effort,’ he concluded.

With another year of fighting ahead, Massoud worried about the mounting problems for the population of the valley: ‘People will be forced out of their homes and lands, orchards will be destroyed, lands will be without crops, and the Panjsher will be ruined.’ Families and mujahideen, exhausted by the war, would migrate to Pakistan and Iran in larger numbers; the resistance would be weakened without the support of the population who provided food, horses, and transport for the mujahideen, and groups in other regions would be discouraged if they saw the resistance in the Panjsher declining, he wrote. ‘The Russians consider the Panjsher to be the centre of such a movement. They know that the majority of people have a particular interest in the Panjsher front, and this front

has proven its merit in capturing people's hearts,' he wrote. 'This is why they are trying to destroy the Panjsher front by any means or keep the front busy with prolonged conflicts … In conclusion, our war against the Russians will be long and continuous, and with time it will expand.'

Yet, despite his worries, Massoud remained convinced that the Russians would not be victorious. 'To what extent will the Russians succeed in their plans? I am writing frankly: none. By God's grace, the people are with us, and in no way can the enemy draw us apart by protecting the people or separating us.' On his travels, he noted how the civilian population was faring:

> On the fifth of the month [late January], I went from Shaba to the second district. To reach the second district, I crossed the pass between Charu and Pojawa in five and a half hours. There was a lot of snow, and my brothers struggled; my leg was painful coming down from the pass, and my patience ran out. I rested for a few hours in the first house, belonging to a brother who had left his job as a watchman after the Russian invasion and now lives by farming. Despite the misery of the house owner and the fact that the Russians had burned most of his possessions, he was very nice, and instantly brought us tea and mulberries, which we ate with appetite.

Massoud visited the town of Parian for the first time in four years, and noted how the people had prospered from working with their horses on the supply caravans to and from Pakistan. The horses carried the semi-precious stone lapis lazuli from Afghanistan to Pakistan for traders, and returned with weapons and ammunition. The cost of transportation varied according to season, but they charged the military front less for the arms run, Massoud wrote, because 'the ammunition and weapons are saving everybody'.

One night in February, he descended through treacherous snow and ice to the centre of the valley:

> It was the first time since the month of Hamal [March–April] that we walked again on the road at Astana and Malaspa. On the narrow part of the road near Astana, the places where vehicles had been blown up by landmines were visible. Under the moonlight, one or two armoured vehicles, some cars, and several BM-13 [rocket] systems could be seen beside the road and along the riverbank. At Nawalej, the wreckages of tanks, armoured vehicles and cars that have been burned were visible, and it seems that the mujahideen of the region have really struggled and fought. I think that there were six or seven wrecked enemy armoured vehicles and thirty to forty cars, and of course these are the few that the enemy has not retrieved. They may have taken three to four times as many destroyed vehicles back with them.

Massoud fielded radio reports from the front. One commander had been martyred, another had defected to the government. Groups mounted a spectacular ambush on the Salang highway, managing to plant explosives in a Russian vehicle transporting aircraft munitions and setting off multiple explosions that blocked the Salang highway for three days. Nevertheless, Massoud complained that mujahideen were mishandling the booty seized in ambushes.

> Salang: our situation is not so bad in Salang, but there is a lot of wrong-doing with the booty taken from the enemy. The confiscated items were not sold correctly, as the men of each base were confiscating cars on the road and were hastily selling items that were worth 2 million afghanis for 400,000 or 500,000 afghanis. The money was wasted; 50 per cent of the useful items such as rice or oil for the base did not reach their destination.
>
> In order to improve things, it was important to give a plan to each base concerning the protection of items and other important issues.

He ordered his front-line commander to stockpile supplies for the military bases. In March, he was on the move again back up the valley:

> Today I came from Karbashi to Parandeh. Usually it takes three and a half to four hours to cover the distance between these two places. Unfortunately, today we took eight hours to cover this short distance. When we arrived near the top of the pass, I wanted to take advantage of the cloudy sky to look around – because when the sky is clear, the enemy can strike the area with a D-30 cannon – but the sky was so dark we became lost for hours. At one point we came almost too close to the enemy post, and one of the brothers nearly stepped on an anti-personnel mine.
>
> Anyway, we reached Parandeh around 11:00 with a painful leg and tired body.[9]
>
> I decided, God willing, to withdraw a bit for a few days in Parandeh in order to think deeply about future tasks and how to implement them, and God willing, as usual, I will take another positive step. I hope enemies and friends will not disturb me and not waste my time with their accounts.

Another year of intense fighting lay ahead, and at times the strain on Massoud seems to have been overwhelming. He wrote in April:

> For some reason, I was in pain all night, with a strong and soul-reducing pain … My nerves are oppressed and my body is weak; I can’t bear talking or walking. I want to be in a corner, praying to God and asking for forgiveness, and not working any more, but military affairs and ten other problems that keep us busy and torment us prevent me from retreat.

His solution was to cut down his night-long meetings and study more.

> I read a lot of Arabic grammar, and I started to study Islamic jurisprudence. I wrote a few articles with reflections on some issues; to some extent, I brought some positive change to my actions and speech.
>
> The reason that I have to bear the burden of all these miseries and take a paternal responsibility is that I am in a position that allows me, more than any other Afghan leader or mujahid, to serve this nation's common objective, which is liberty and to live in the shadow of Islam.

He resolved to bring positive changes to his behaviour: 'Pay attention to all moral issues and improve my weakness, strive in the quest of science and knowledge, accomplish tasks with speed and immediate action. God willing, fate, ethics, knowledge, and action will bring me to my objective.' He ended the passage with his signature, and three words: 'Patience, will, bravery.'

12

Massoud Takes Farkhar

Massoud's plan to escape from what had become the straitjacket of the Panjsher – where the Russian air force could harry and bomb him at will – did not become a full reality until 1986, when he captured a major government fort at Farkhar in the northern province of Takhar. He had realised that the Panjsher was a potential deathtrap as long ago as 1982. That September, just after the Russians withdrew from their latest assault on the valley at the end of Panjsher VI, he told me, 'If the Russian attacks go on like this, we'll have to change our tactics and conduct a more mobile war. As long as I am here, the Russians will continue to attack the Panjsher. So, next spring, I intend to leave the Panjsher and conduct a mobile war against the big Russian bases in the north and north-east.'

In fact, it was four years later, in 1986 – after making a documentary about a Pashtun mujahideen group in 1984 – that I was tipped off by Massoud's youngest brother, Ahmad Wali, then the Afghan ambassador in London, that Massoud was planning a big operation in Takhar that summer.[1] I started planning, getting approval from our former backer, Charles Denton at Central Television, who had sponsored my first film on Massoud. As well as Andy Skrzypkowiak, who had served seven years in the SAS and knew Afghanistan, I took a second cameraman at Charles's insistence – Noel Smart, an extremely experienced documentary cameraman who did a lot of work for Central. We took no sound man – together Skrzypkowiak and Smart would do the sound – and no extra producer. Our three-man team was the most compact solution possible. Both Skrzypkowiak and Smart were shooting film on what is called double

system, the classic documentary technique whereby sound is recorded on a machine separate from the camera.

Massoud's plans, however, did not make life easy for us. We had to walk or ride north from Chitral on the remote north-east border of Pakistan, through Nuristan, the highest and wildest part of Afghanistan – on the route that Alexander the Great took when he invaded India in 327 bc, a ten-day trek over five passes of about 4,500 m each – to reach the Panjsher Valley. We had the inestimable bonus of having as our guide and mentor Masood Khalili, perhaps Massoud's closest friend.

Having climbed the last pass – Chamar, which leads into the Panjsher and where, going in the other direction, we had a very tough crossing in 1982 – we spent a few days in the Panjsher staying with Najmuddin, the local commander, who fortunately for us had a wife who was an excellent cook, although we never saw the good lady. Due to the inexorable rules of Afghan family life – only men from the immediate family are allowed to visit the women's side of the house – we were firmly restricted to the guest quarters, and our food was served there by mine host, as efficient as he was charming. Like many Afghans, Najmuddin was a great raconteur, and during the next few days, while we waited for Massoud's instructions regarding the next leg of the journey, we heard his repertoire of stories in great detail.

After about a week with Najmuddin, we got instructions to head north. Another week of hard travel by foot and on horseback ensued. Finally we arrived in a valley called Namakau, which Massoud had made his base while he prepared his attack on the Afghan government fort at Farkhar. Inevitably, when we arrived he was busy elsewhere, and we settled down to wait. It was not until 6 p.m., with the valley already in shadow, that Skrzypkowiak announced dramatically, 'Ahmad Shah is coming', and we all rose to our feet expectantly.

Massoud came striding up the path below our house as if he did not have a care in the world, accompanied only by Jan Mohammed, his quartermaster – who had been the licensee of a Kabul hotel before the Russian invasion, and was an excellent cook – and a young assistant; surprisingly, there were no bodyguards. Massoud looked exactly as he had done when I had last seen him four years before, in 1982; a spare figure, shoulders slightly hunched, with the same springy step, and the same quick, intelligent eyes. He came towards us

smiling, and shook hands with each of us in turn.

‘Vous allez bien? Le voyage n’était pas trop difficile?’ He said he thought I was looking well, which pleased me. We went inside and he gestured for us to sit down on the carpet beside him. At first we talked in French; then, to bring in the others, I switched to English, with Khalili interpreting. My first impressions were that Massoud was in good health and even better spirits, his mind just as quick and incisive as before, and he was not a bit tired, as Jan Mohammed had told us earlier. With only an occasional interruption for Massoud to see someone or for prayers, we talked from 6 p.m. until 11 p.m.; even Jan Mohammed’s excellent dinner of chips and fried meat hardly interrupted the flow.

Massoud began by describing what he was trying to achieve in the north. There were four stages, he said, with his customary precision, the first of which was the preparatory phase, which was now over. The second phase consisted of organising the mujahideen both in the mountains and on the plains. The third stage was the offensive phase, which they were currently in, and the fourth was mobilisation: ‘That means the general mobilisation of everyone in the country. We are not yet ready for the fourth stage; it will take time.’

‘Generally speaking,’ Massoud went on, ‘we have completed the programme for basic training in the five provinces – that is: Baghlan, Kunduz, Takhar, Badakhshan, and Mazar. These provinces are now able to operate independently.’

‘If you gave an order to be carried out in the north, would it be obeyed?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

Massoud then talked about the battle at Khelab, in the same province of Takhar where we now were. ‘About 150 to 200 Russian commandos were landed there by helicopter. Against them we had only about twenty or twenty-five mujahideen. The battle lasted for several days, and we inflicted very heavy casualties on the Russians.’

‘How many?’ I asked Khalili.

‘It is hard to say exactly how many, but very many, including a Russian officer.’ Massoud then talked about the Pushghur operation, which he carried out in the previous year, 1985, and which probably ranks as Massoud’s biggest victory of the entire war. Not only was Pushghur in the middle of the Panjsher

Valley, only a few miles from three Soviet army bases, but it was within easy range of Soviet bases at Bagram and Kabul. Massoud's success, right under the noses of the Russians, must have been a tremendous encouragement to the mujahideen and a serious blow to the morale of the Afghan army, as well as to that of the Russians themselves. Massoud drew a map and showed exactly how the attack was carried out. It was another example of his meticulous planning.

Khalili added a gloss of his own. 'Commander discussed various plans and finally he adopted the plan put forward by a young mujahid from the area.[2] He suggested that the mujahideen cross the bridge over the river just beside the base at night and then infiltrate the base. They did this, and when the infiltration force was established inside the camp, the main force outside started the attack. The two operations were so well synchronised that they captured the base very quickly.'

But Massoud was more interested in describing his next operation: an attack on another base near Farkhar, about twenty miles north. 'This is the last in a series of garrisons – forts – Soviet and Afghan, which extend from Khanabad to the east,' he explained. 'It is heavily protected by minefields and machine-gun posts, and has a garrison of about 300 Afghan army soldiers. We will attack it with nine groups, each of about thirty men, which is more than strictly necessary, but some of them will be relatively untrained. What is very important about this operation is that, for the first time, we will have groups drawn from all over the north, under one operational command.'

I said excitedly, 'We would very much like to film that. Andy [Skrzypkowiak] can film the actual attack on the ground, and we would be with you. Would that be possible?'

Massoud nodded. 'Yes, of course.' He then turned, with remarkable frankness, as I wrote at the time, to his long-term plans.[3] First he drew a rough sketch of the north-east. 'This area is very strategic, because you have one road running north from Kabul, through the Salang, to the Soviet border. Then you have another road, running east from Kabul, here, to Jalalabad, near the Pakistani border. Dividing this whole area is the Hindu Kush. So, you have three areas: one, the area north of the Hindu Kush; two, the area south of the Hindu Kush, and bordering Pakistan; and three, Kabul.

'I have virtually completed my work in this area, north of the Hindu Kush.

Shortly, I will be concentrating on the area south of the Hindu Kush. And finally I will turn to the third area, Kabul itself. This will take time. We are not ready for that yet.'

It was impossible not to be impressed by his energy and determination. I remembered that he had told me four years earlier how he had planned to move out of the Panjsher, exporting his guerrilla war, as it were, to the north-east, 'carrying the war to the enemy's bases', as he put it. Well, it seemed he was well on the way to doing just that.

'Kabul must obviously be the ultimate target,' I said. 'How much of an organisation have you got there?'

'We are very strong in Kabul. We have an infrastructure there already. But we are not ready to mobilise it yet. We have a lot of work to do first.'

We were all feeling sleepy, and Skrzypkowiak and Smart excused themselves and retired to bed on the verandah outside. Massoud, who did not seem at all tired, began to question me about Pakistan in general, and about President Zia and General Akhtar, then the head of military intelligence, in particular.

I told him, 'I saw President Zia before I left Pakistan, and he told me that unless the Russians agree to withdraw their troops "within months if not weeks" – those were his words – there would be no agreement and no return of the refugees. I think he personally is as committed to the jihad as ever. But a lot of people in Pakistan are tired of the war and would like a settlement.'

Massoud digested this without comment.

'They say they would like to help you,' I went on. 'If only they knew what your plans were, they would try to help you. But they say it is impossible to find out what you are doing and what your problems are.'

'They are welcome to send a delegation to see what we are doing at any time,' Massoud said. 'I have always told them that. But I will not send them details of my operations. They have asked for this in return for sending us arms. But this I will never do. We tell no one what our plans are in advance.'

I asked him about the state of the civilian population.

'The Russians have bombed the north very heavily because of our operations and our training programme. Khanabad was the most recent example, but there has been a lot of bombing all over the north. The Russians have also deliberately destroyed people's crops and the irrigation systems, so the population is facing

famine. The dilemma is that, because of the bombing and the shortage of food, many civilians want to go to Pakistan as refugees, or to the towns, where they will come under government control. This is what the government wants.

‘I and all the other commanders in the north have given orders that they are not to leave their villages, but if we tell them to stay, we must give them money to buy food. And we are very short of money.’ Massoud turned his palms upwards to demonstrate the enormity of the problem facing the mujahideen.

The evening ended on a more optimistic note, with Massoud describing enthusiastically how a mujahideen commander in Baghlan city, surrounded by Russian and Afghan army posts, managed to survive by using a network of underground tunnels. Massoud showed me on his map.

‘Look. You can see here. The Russians are in this factory, an old sugar factory. They have people here, and here, and here.’ The posts were marked in red on the map. ‘But the commander uses tunnels that go right under the city to attack them, sometimes here, sometimes here.’ He laughed.

Massoud spent the next morning hearing petitions and complaints, rather like an MP conducting a clinic in his constituency, except that he combined political and military matters. First came an old man, with a beautifully combed white beard, who complained that some of the young men in his village were behaving like ‘hooligans’. Massoud smiled, as if to say ‘we were all young once’, but he wrote out a letter warning them to desist.

‘Don’t be caught with this letter,’ he said. ‘Najib [the Afghan communist party’s new leader] is cruel.’

‘I trust in God,’ the old man said.

‘Babrak [Karmal, the ousted president] was better. He had pity on the old.’

‘Don’t mention their names to me.’

Massoud finished writing. ‘Be careful. Everything is in this letter.’

He then had a conversation with his deputy, Commander Gadda, about how much tax they should levy on local traders. Gadda wanted to know if they should differentiate between local traders and outsiders who passed through the area. ‘Yes – 5 per cent for the locals, 10 per cent for the others,’ Massoud said.

A man sitting and listening interjected, ‘May God make the man who cheats at this time go blind.’

Finally, there was a more difficult encounter with the Jamiat commander from

Shomali, north of Kabul. He was not afraid to criticise Massoud to his face, saying that Massoud had promised him military assistance but had failed to deliver when he desperately needed it. Massoud listened with exemplary patience, repeatedly asking, as the commander digressed, that he come to the 'heart of the matter'.

After he had given his own version of the incident, Massoud delivered a little pep talk to the assembled audience. 'From the lowest to the highest in the revolution, everyone should understand, we don't play politics like the others. We should know where we get our income and where we spend it, who is honest and who is dishonest.'

We had lunch together, and I recalled that Massoud had always been a sparing and choosy eater, picking out bad bits of rice and putting them to one side. But he was not at all choosy about his table companions. Anyone could sit beside him and share whatever was available. Massoud also enjoyed intelligent, or at least lively, conversation throughout the meal – not always the case in Afghanistan, where many brethren fall on their food without ceremony, exchanging few words until the dishes are empty.

Prayers followed, and then another session with the Koran. Just before sundown, Smart and I installed ourselves on the flat roof of one of the houses, where we were going to film the mujahideen at prayer. Massoud and about fifty mujahideen, including newly arrived commanders from various provinces who were congregating for the coming battle, walked up to our roof and stood in two long lines. The mullah stood in front of them and started the ritual, which, although I have now seen it dozens of times, never fails to move me. Most of these men were rural folk, many of them young, in their teens or early twenties, and yet there was about them a sort of nobility as they submitted themselves to a faith that had given them the strength to fight for seven years against a superpower quite prepared to destroy them and their families, their homes, and even their country; this was a faith that could move mountains.

'Allahu Akbar' ('God is great'). There is no God but God.

After prayers, two or three young men sat on the roof and intoned the Koran to themselves, rocking slowly as they sat cross-legged, while two older men cleaned their Kalashnikovs in preparation for the impending operation. Just as we finished filming, Massoud invited us to join him on an abutting roof. He

made me sit beside him and asked if I would like coffee. I said I would, and he started to make it. First, he placed a large spoonful of sugar in a glass, then a large spoonful of dried milk – made in Ireland, I saw, to my amazement – and then a spoonful of instant coffee. Adding a small amount of weak tea from the teapot, he stirred the mixture to a paste, finally filling the glass with more weak tea. The result was delicious, with no taste of tea. While he was doing this, a young man who often acted as his assistant and bodyguard, a relative from the Panjsher, was making Massoud a cup of coffee to the same recipe.

We then discussed how we would film the coming battle. I explained it was unusual to have two cameras at our disposal and suggested that Skrzypkowiak should be with the main attacking force, perhaps with one of the senior commanders like Pannah, while Smart and I would stay with Massoud in his command post.

Massoud confirmed that he would direct the battle by radio from the top of a hill. 'All my commanders have walkie-talkies, so we will be in touch throughout the entire operation. You will be able to see and hear everything.'[4] Massoud said we could also film his sand table briefing and his final briefing to all the commanders. 'You will also be able to see the arms and ammunition arriving in the next few days, and the various groups, although there is some problem with the Panjsheri group. They may be delayed. So, the operation may be a day or two late, although it would be dangerous to delay too long.'

During our conversation about the future of the war, somewhat to my surprise, Massoud said he thought the Russians did want to withdraw, and he said that when he discussed a ceasefire with the Russians in 1983 his Soviet interlocutor had told him this was the case.[5] He went on to say, 'There would have to be some sort of election, under international supervision. The Afghans would have to choose their own form of government.'

'But,' I said, 'surely the Russians would only withdraw if they could leave a communist government in power in Kabul. After seven years of fighting, after all the money they have spent, all their casualties, they can't just walk out, leaving the mujahideen to take over, can they?'

'No, I agree that they want to leave a communist government behind them. But that is not acceptable to us. So, the war will go on.'

It was nearly midnight, and I was beginning to wilt, but Massoud seemed as

fresh as when he arrived and eager to go on. The other thing that I found frankly astonishing was his ability to relax. There was no sign of strain, despite the coming battle and the multifarious problems he had to cope with. He began to talk about the difficulties the Russians had in Afghanistan, unable to rely on the Afghan army or even the Afghan communist party.

'There are dedicated Afghan communists who are in touch with me, and who assure me they support the mujahideen because of the way the country and the population is being destroyed. These people are or were committed communists, who sincerely believed that their policies would improve the lot of their fellow countrymen. But they did not expect the Russians to behave in the way they have, committing atrocities, bombing the civilian population, killing people, burning people, and so on.

'If the Russians were not here, the Afghan army would stage a coup d'état straightaway. I am sure of that. I know that because I have very good intelligence sources right at the very top. When the war is over, people will be surprised to find out who has been helping the mujahideen.'

'I suppose,' I said, 'the Russians will only be prepared to withdraw, without conditions, when they are forced to by mounting casualties and mounting pressure from the rest of the world. When it is their only option – rather as the Americans were forced to get out of Vietnam.'

'Yes,' Massoud said. 'I agree.'

The unanswered question that we left hanging in the still night air was: did the mujahideen have the military muscle to force the Russians to leave Afghanistan? It seemed to me, in the final analysis, to come down to that. Next day, Massoud described his plans for attacking the Farkhar fort in detail. Mujahideen and weapons convoys began arriving, and on 15 August we followed Massoud to watch the attack from a mountaintop.

The barrage started slowly, but with impressive weight: *thump… thump… thump…* Then came the crash of the BM-12 rocket launcher, which was sited well back, and the slam of the 75 mm recoilless rifles. Smoke began to drift across the front of the sand-brown forts, pinpricked by red flashes as the mujahideen fire found the target. The defenders took several minutes to recover from their initial shock, and then their Dashakas began to return the fire in long rattles, like angry woodpeckers.

Massoud sat tensely on the bare earth, headset clamped over his *pukul*, talking non-stop to his commanders in the heat of the battle below. His radio operator – Engineer Aref, later to be his intelligence chief – squatted next to him, the set's long aerial waving above his head like the antenna of some strange insect. Massoud became excited when, after six minutes, Azim, one of his four battle commanders, captured the first machine-gun post on a little hill above the main forts. Within fifteen minutes, he had taken two more.

As the light faded, Massoud was impatient to clinch the battle, shouting over the radio to Pannah, who seemed to be held up and out of contact. Finally, the radio operator announced he had Pannah on the net.

'Commander Pannah, two-five, two-five, repeat. Can you hear me? This is headquarters.'

'Yes, I can, go ahead.'

'Where are you? Where are you?'

'I have reached the minefields.'

'Listen, don't worry about the mines. Don't worry about the mines; you can go by the road. The forts have been captured. Use the road. Hurry.'

Two more forts fell shortly afterwards; only the fifth and last, defended by the KHAD, the secret police, was still holding out. Knowing that to surrender might be to sign their own death warrants, the detested KHAD agents tended to fight to the bitter end. Massoud's commanders were trying desperately to take this last fort. But one machine-gun post which gave it covering fire had, for some reason, not been captured, and was still in action. It did not fall, in fact, until the next day.

By now, the light had almost gone; the sunset was a lingering glow in the darkening sky. Smart was shooting wide open, on fast film stock. It was a scene of great drama and beauty. Massoud and a little circle of his brothers and close friends around him were silhouetted against the sky, with an almost-full moon shining pale silver above his head. When it was almost dark, Massoud got up and walked down the hill, Smart following him with the camera until he ran out of film. Then we had to walk back to the top to recover the rucksacks, the exposed magazines, and the tripod; by this time, we were almost alone on the mountain, the sound of gunfire still crackling angrily below us. A familiar figure loomed out of the dark.

‘Sandy, Noel, this way.’ It was Jan Mohammad, who had discreetly remained at a lower level during the battle and then had come looking for us. He quickly took charge. ‘Massoud went down a long time ago. Why are you so slow?’

I started to explain that making a film was a slow, laborious business, and then realised he was not listening. Jan Mohammad had seized the tripod and started off at speed down the hill.

Massoud captured the remaining outpost the next day. It had been an impressive victory. As we left on the long trek home, I took a photograph of him. His smile said it all.

13

Expanding into the North

Building on his victory at Farkhar, Massoud set his sights on liberating Taloqan. A volume of diaries dated 1986–7 describes his daily work of meetings and problem-solving as he expanded his control in the north, developing his plan to unite the mujahideen into a national army to co ordinate tactics and free the northern provinces from Russian occupation.[1] In between managing weapons supplies and the truculence of individual commanders, he set up training and command bases, and also took time to reflect, revise strategy, and even examine his own performance.[2]

He wrote from Piu, a valley in the northern province of Takhar where he made a home with his bride, Sediqa, for several years, and began with a vow to improve himself.

In the name of God, the Just, the Merciful
Piu
Sunday evening, night of the 29th
[20.11.1988]

Years before the revolution and my involvement in political activity, I decided to commend my life to God and to serve Islam. With this decision, I joined the Islamic movement, and I thank God that he has looked favourably upon me and guided me in his way. For a while now, I have had no other duty except for the work of God and Islam. I have no other aim apart from this first intention. Naturally, I have not been immune to sins and mistakes, and on this path I have not always exerted myself to the necessary limit. My deliberate and unconscious errors rest on me.

For a while, my thoughts about this have made me persevere greatly on the way I have chosen. I have tried to overcome challenges and difficulties to the best of human strength and ability.

In the past, several times, I made a decision and then for a few days I strove to make positive changes to my life and campaign in different ways, but every time, after a few days' attempts, I would

again return to my first and usual state. I did not display the necessary determination in the pursuit of the change I wanted, for lack of belief in myself.

This time I am determined, and with the assistance of God the Almighty I have decided to bring about a positive change within myself and will use every opportunity and possibility to achieve my goals.

God bless these good intentions, and give success to my actions. Amen.

Training base, Khost Deh
The evening of 30 Aqrab 1365
[21.11.1986]

It was my intention to go to Khost Deh to see Arianpour [one of the commanders from Badakhshan, and a member of Jamiat-i-Islami] and the other brothers, to talk about the organisation of the base and the north-eastern zone.

Although I tried to hurry, I was unable to reach the base before 10 a.m., and I realised that nobody was there. I therefore dealt with minor matters with the leaders of a group of forty people who had come sometime earlier to be trained. I sent them back to their area with thirty pieces of weaponry. I spoke at length with Dr Haqbin, one of the four members of the supervisory council in Peshawar.

In the evening, I spoke to Arianpour to ask his opinion about the organising of the base and the north-eastern zone, and the extent of their capabilities. But he did not say anything, and I don't know why.

The last person I talked to was Commander Sayed Ekramuddin Agha, and I authorised 130 pieces of weaponry. He was to keep thirty for himself and pass on 100 pieces to Commander Maulvi Kheir Mohammad. He demanded a further ten pieces for the people at Fereng, and I had no choice but to authorise them because he sulks.

Amer Mujahid [Takhar provisional commander from Jamiat] was sulking in his house because he said that we had not consulted him. Arian-pour and Sayed Ekramuddin Agha went to persuade him to come. I shall see him tomorrow. All in all, I am not happy with what transpired today.

My private house
Sunday

I want to spend several days at my own place to think about everything. I know from experience that this reflection helps me to distinguish what is important. I want to think back over the last two years. I could predict today's circumstances, and I drew up a plan to deal with them. I need to go even further back in order to clarify the situation. It would be best to start from the year 1362 [1983].

After the ceasefire with the Russians in the month of —— 1361 [1982],[3] we had a calm period, which gave us the opportunity to do the following:

1. Prepare the Panjsher against further attacks by the enemy;
2. Open up the logistical roads to the Panjsher to secure the transport of munitions and food;
3. Develop military bases;
4. Bring together the different parties and end the struggle with Hisb-i-Islami;
5. Try to get more financial and military help from Peshawar and correct misunderstandings.

During this ceasefire, we were able to achieve some of our objectives, but not all. Local forces occupied and opened the road to Andarab. The intervention of Farid Khan [a commander of Harakat-i-Inqilabi] ended the fighting in the mountains, which had broken out spontaneously. Our military efforts to open the road to Karan-i-Munjan [between Badakhshan and Chitral in Pakistan] proved unavailing.

In the month of —— 1362 [1983], at a gathering of my colleagues from Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz, and Baghlan, we managed to build a central organisation in the north, and later to set up administrations in the following districts: Khost, Ishkamish, a bit in Farkhar, and Keshem.

We were not successful in building an alliance with the other parties in the north. We were not able to make any progress on the Treaty of Koh-i-Safi [in Kabul] because Hisb-i-Islami was unrelentingly hostile. However, we did manage to get some agreement with two Hisb-i-Islami commanders, Sayed Mansur and Engineer Salim. As a result, we had a quiet time in the north. We were also able to establish communications with other parties, either by line or face-to-face.

Unfortunately, we were not very successful in Peshawar because we were under pressure, due to our ceasefire with the Russians.

I think that our main achievement in 1362 [1983] was that we prepared the Panjsher for more fighting with the Russians and we were also able to set up some bases outside of the Panjsher. These bases helped us a lot in the following years against Russian attacks.

On 2 Saur 1363 [22 April 1984], the Russians launched a massive attack on the Panjsher and, for the first time, they used Tu-16s [Tupolev strategic bombers] and dropped thousands of tons of explosives. Exactly twenty-four days before their attack, my network in Kabul gave me the complete logistical plan, so I made a secret tactical withdrawal and made a number of successful pre-emptive attacks.

The enemy thought that if they could engage us in face-to-face combat – with the help of aerial bombardment and artillery, and taking advantage of the bad weather and their numerical superiority – they could break us in forty days. They were wrong and suffered defeat. The Russians were furious with this unexpected reverse and adopted a relentless attack by helicopter, aerial bombardment, and special forces. By using hit-andrun tactics, we thwarted these attacks and caused many casualties. The enemy sought to correct the tactics they used in the first attack of the year 1363 [1984] and, in the month of Saunbolah [August], they put their new tactics into effect. On this occasion, in order to cut off our retreat, they surrounded our entire area so that when they attacked the Panjsher they dropped troops near all our bases at Khost, Andarab, Salang, and Band-i-Kohistan – but, contrary to the Russians' expectations, this time the resistance fought within our area, making the deployment of their troops around us redundant.

The Russian forces suffered casualties in the Panjsher Valley, so they turned to strengthening their own bases at Pushghur, Tambonnah, Baharak, Bazarak, Rokha, and Anaba, and withdrew the rest of their forces. The Russians contented themselves with a military occupation of the Panjsher Valley to wear us out, so that we would not be able to set up more bases of our own. On the other hand, they sought to bribe those people who had left the Panjsher Valley for Kabul in search of work to return to their own villages with money and weapons, so that they would fight us, and the Russians could reduce the level of their own forces there.

Fortunately, the enemy's plan was defeated because our people who had taken refuge in Kabul

refused to return to the Panjsher, in spite of the harassment.

Towards the end of this year, we began to occupy the reinforced and mined mountain positions of the enemy. Before that, we had begun to attack the enemy's military supply trains and caused considerable difficulties for them, so they had to strengthen their forces and add to their positions in order to defend their garrison.

In the winter of this year, we were worried that the Russians would widen their attacks, but, fortunately, we were able to cope with their attacks.

In the year 1364 [1985], we intensified our attacks on the enemy's supply trains. We managed to occupy the Pushghur and Andarab garrisons, and we captured 400 soldiers and around 100 high-ranking government officers who had come to inspect the difficult military position in the Panjsher. This demonstrated to Afghanistan and the world that not only was the Panjsher not conquered but [the resistance] had become stronger.

In order to compensate for the poor morale of the government troops and to prevent their own garrisons being overrun, the Russians launched another attack on the Panjsher, which was the last Russian attack on the valley. They did not gain anything and were obliged to withdraw, and the pressures on us reduced.

Now the Panjsher was standing on its own feet, and we set about continuing the activities we had begun in the year of '62 [1983] to expand, strengthen, reorganise, and develop our bases. We convened a meeting in the month of —— in '64 [1985] in Safed Chehir, and I appointed Saran-wal Saheb Mahmoud Khan as the administrator of the Panjsher. I myself set off secretly for the north, to establish bases and the Special Units.

Over several months I succeeded in training 100 people for this work and placed them in three sectors of twenty to thirty people. The two positive outcomes that I managed to accomplish in this period were [dealing with] internal politics of Jamiat-i-Islami and forging local alliances.

It should be mentioned here that, during '63 and '64 [1984 and 1985], the Russians and the Kabul government made overtures to negotiate a peace agreement for the Panjsher, but the conditions they proposed were unacceptable to us. Here I should like to express my gratitude to our intelligence people in Kabul, and to stress how crucial to the outcome of the war were their efforts in continuously keeping us informed about the enemy's plans.

<u>The year '65 [1986]</u>

During this year, we carried out many political and military tasks which are worthy of mention. In —— I held a meeting of colleagues from four north-eastern provinces. The meeting took place in the valley of Sultan Shireh. We drew up a programme for the coming year and examined the events of the last year.

This year, we managed to diminish the disputes within Jamiat-i-Islami. My problems with the Jamiat-i-Islami commander for Baghlan, Abdul Hai Khan, were, to a great extent, resolved, and to a degree we were able to reduce the internal tensions in Khost, Farkhar, Andarab, Ishkamish, Taloqan, and Kunduz.

- We accomplished some organisational work in Khost, Andarab, Ishkamish, and Farkhar;
- We had meetings with the leaders of different parties, which enabled us to carry out combined military operations against the enemy;
- We managed to occupy the garrisons at Farkhar and Nahrin;

- We carried out combined operations in Kunduz, with the help of different parties other than Hisb-i-Islami; for the first time, we successfully attacked Andarab;
- The Central Units showed their military and organisational value;[4]
- We repulsed major attacks in Khelab and appreciated the resistance of our people;

In short, this year was successful in strengthening the Shura-i-Nazar in the northern areas.

By 1987, the outlook was shifting, as the Soviet Union began negotiating its withdrawal from Afghanistan and tried to draw support inside and outside the country for a communist-led government of national accord. Massoud's diary shows he was acutely aware of the importance of being prepared for the next stage.

The year '66 [1987]

In the winter of '65 [1986], we held a meeting with colleagues from different areas in Khelab to briefly review past events and to discuss the government's suggestions for peace. At this meeting, some of my colleagues turned down the national peace proposals and said that they were prepared to accept the consequences in order to expel the Russians from Afghanistan. We prepared the ground for —— in this country. They agreed plans in different political and military fields.

1. In the field of political action:
   a. Improve the organisation of the Shura-i-Nazar;
   b. Expand the building of bases in the mountains and everywhere;
   c. Improve relations with rival parties to improve cooperation in the area and in the towns;
   d. Improve relations with Peshawar;[5]
   e. Gather statistics about the people in the area of the northern provinces and in the Namakau Valley in order to estimate the influence of the civil and military power of the government, the rival parties, and us.
2. In the military field:
   a. Increase the elite Central Units to 100;
   b. Occupy four garrisons;
   c. Store captured heavy weapons;
   d. Keep the money in a safe place.

Massoud reflected that his efforts to unite the mujahideen had been undermined by infighting and even killings.

In the course of this year, we were unsuccessful in organising and in uniting the area. Rather, with killings, like the killing of Commander Gholam, all areas will feel unsafe if we cannot bring about a strong centre in the council.

- Our relations with Peshawar-based parties remained unchanged;
- We were able to establish a base in Badakhshan;

• Andarab, in Baghlan, was mostly liberated;
• We expanded into Mazar-i-Sharif with the help of its commander, Khalil Khan;
• In military matters, the training of our elite Central Units improved. We set up a separate organisation for the spares for heavy weapons;
• We carried out successful major operations in Kalafghan, Karan, Manjan, Borkah, and the Panjsher, which opened our logistic routes. This had been one of our biggest problems, because Hisb-i-Islami in Nuristan had blocked them;
• We did not achieve spectacular results in the fields of economy or intelligence, but we achieved some success in education;
• Our greatest achievement this year was to get rid of Hisb-i-Islami in parts of Badakhshan.

The year ’67 [1988]

In the winter of ’66 [1987], talk about the expulsion of the Russians from Afghanistan was very heated. I told myself then that the winner would be the side or party that was best prepared politically, militarily, culturally, etc. I personally think that the winner will be the one that is prepared militarily and politically.

What I mean by being politically prepared is that a party that is well organised internally and that can obtain the support of foreign powers such as Iran, Pakistan, Arab countries, and the West, will dominate any coalition with other parties. [That party] should also hold back from hard line policies. Such a party will deserve to run the country.

What I mean by being militarily prepared is that any party that has a disciplined army that can hold an area, and that has effective logistics, a strong economy, and effective public relations, can at the appropriate time seize power.

With this in mind, in the winter of 1366 [1987], I centralised political activity and considered founding a national Islamic army in Afghanistan, and I instructed my colleagues to increase the numbers to 100 in each of the bases. We had 300 from the Panjsher, so, in combination with the above, we had 800 fighters. If you added the elite units, this made 1,000.

In order to improve logistics, Najmeddin Khan was instructed to open the roads of Karan-u-Munjan and Kafir Kotal by the beginning of spring.

When we entered the year ’67 [1988], I thought of convening a meeting of the most important leaders of the region, and eventually we were able to organise a meeting on 16 Jowza [6 June] in Farkhar [drawing leaders] from ten regions, which in its own right was something of an achievement in Afghanistan. In the meeting, I pointed out a number of particular matters in the new minutes signed by the Shura-i-Nazar and showed them to the others, who accepted my plan.

The four matters that I pointed out were:

1. The critical situation;
2. The fate of ——;[6]
3. The volatility of the situation;
4. The need to create a new agreement, following the falling apart of the former unity agreement.

In short, I was trying to explain the necessity of having a clear plan for the situation after the Russians left Afghanistan. This plan should comprise:

1. Centralising our activity in four zones;
2. Creating a centrally controlled army of 3,000 men with 6,000 auxiliaries, together amounting to

9,000 men;
3. Starting a clean-up operation immediately after the Russian withdrawal;
4. Uniform and strong logistics;
5. Setting up a radio station and newspaper;
6. Improving relations between the parties and creating regional agreements, especially creating a communications hub for the commanders in Afghanistan;
7. Improving relations with opposition parties and countries that have a stake in Afghanistan, [e.g.] establishing an appropriate relationship with the Russians, and also with the left-wing groups in Kabul.

Now the question is this: to what extent can we carry out this programme, and how much time have we wasted?

As soon as the meeting was over, I went to the Panjsher and stayed there for a month to sort out the difficulties among our leading members in Parwan and Kapisa. I had meetings with our members in Kabul.

The mujahideen managed to free the Panjsher after several years of enemy occupation, including the towns of Taloqan, Kunduz, Takhar, and Andarab. After the Panjsher, I went quickly to Farkhar in order to meet the commanders of different parties, because we wanted to impose order and administration in Taloqan city. We appointed Maulvi Sir Shah Mohammad to be responsible for the town. In the meantime, Ghulam Mohammad Arianpour conquered the governing centre of Keshem.

We had not yet completed business in the Panjsher when we received news that we should go quickly to Karan-u-Munjan to meet the Pakistanis. As I set out on this journey, I heard that Professor Rabbani was also on his way to Karan. Together, we met the Pakistani generals – Janjua, Kazemi, and Khaled. This was a successful meeting, because the Pakistanis undertook to supply weapons, clothing, and funding for a 3,000-strong army.

The following day, together with Professor Rabbani, who was accompanied by a Palestinian professor called Abdullah Azzam and others, we arrived in the Panjsher.

Azzam was the founder of the Maktab al-Khadamat (‘Afghan Services Bureau’), which marshalled Arab fighters to join the Afghan jihad in the 1980s and which was the forerunner of al-Qaeda. The Arabs had mostly supported Pashtun mujahideen groups in areas close to the Pakistan border, but Azzam had sent an Algerian aide (Abdullah Anas, who became his sonin-law) to spend time with Massoud in the Panjsher, and was now visiting for himself and meeting Massoud for the first time. Interestingly, Massoud described the meeting as useful but later in his diary expressed suspicion about the Arabs’ intentions.

I was with Rabbani for a month. When Rabbani left Farkhar, I began the task of sending 50–60 trained fighters to Pakistan. Afterwards, I had a meeting with Arianpour. When that finished, I met a United Nations delegation. While the delegation was here, I had a meeting with Mr Kushani [leader of a government militia, who later defected to Massoud’s side].

For several days, I had a series of meetings with Arianpour and others to appoint heads of different committees for the north-east zones.

These passages give an indication of the changing times. Massoud's troops were seizing control of whole districts and towns in the north-east and, as the Soviet withdrawal became a growing likelihood, external supporters of the mujahideen tried to influence events. Massoud added that Russian officials were also requesting meetings.[7]

Summary:

- We were not very successful in sorting out our internal affairs; we were only able to appoint a few administrators for the north-eastern zones;
- It was useful to meet Professor Rabbani and his associates, among which were Professor Abdullah Azzam, the Pakistanis, and the United Nations delegation;
- Although I did not take a direct part in it, the liberation of the Panjsher, Andarab, Keshem, Jorm, Baharak, Taloqan, and Kunduz was noteworthy;
- Unfortunately, we were not able to achieve our main goal of setting up a national army;
- I also failed to establish the logistic train I had hoped to create;
- We are in a desperate financial situation;
- Our political activity in Peshawar was successful, and we were able to establish relations with those responsible to a certain extent.

If the zones had begun to work properly and we had been able to get at least 1,000 fighters in the army, and if we had been able to fully liberate Taloqan, I would have been content, but I am not happy with what we have been able to achieve in this golden opportunity.

I did not have much time to reflect on my own achievements, which was unfortunate. God willing, what we have yet to do is:

1. We need to set up various committees of the Shura-i-Nazar and appoint the right people to them;
2. We have to recruit properly skilled people as commanders of the army and train them;
   a. We have to support them with arms, ammunition, uniforms, housing, and finance;
   b. We must list these people and issue them with identity cards;
3. To deal with the problems of Khost, we need to introduce the members of the committees to the people;
4. We have to do our utmost to supply ammunition.

Headquarters
Saturday evening ——

Tonight is the night when I must think about the future. I am not unhappy about my past, but I think I must change both in my social life and in the way I do things. I am aware of my shortcomings, hence I want to change both my underground existence and my public life. I have tried several times in the past to change, but I have not been very successful. But now circumstances have changed and forced me, inadvertently, to change my way of life. I hope to God I can succeed.

The diary entry ends with a simple list:

Tomorrow’s programme:

- Morning prayers;
- Half an hour’s study; tea; writing and sending messages;
- Public affairs until noon;
- From 12 noon to 2 p.m., lunch, prayers, reading books, and examining problems;
- From 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., public affairs;
- From early evening to 8 p.m., dinner;
- From 8 p.m. to 9:30 p.m., reading and work.

14

The Russians Prepare to Withdraw

Massoud had concluded as early as 1982 from his negotiations with Soviet officials that their losses were weighing heavily on them. By the end of the war, official Soviet casualties had reached 15,000 dead and several times as many wounded. The war had become increasingly unpopular at home, and had destroyed what little credibility the Kremlin had left internationally. In 1986 the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, described Afghanistan as a 'bleeding wound' and indicated that he wanted to pull out.[1] It took another two years before he made the fateful announcement that the Soviet Union would leave Afghanistan, beginning its withdrawal on 15 May 1988 and completing it nine months later.

As they prepared to leave, the Soviets sought to bring Massoud into a unity government led by Najibullah, the former KHAD chief who became president of Afghanistan in 1987. The Afghan vice president, Abdul Hamid Muhtat – a former military officer who had played a key role in the Saur Revolution and served as minister and ambassador in the communist governments since – was sent to try to persuade Massoud to join Najibullah's government. Muhtat travelled by helicopter to the north in May 1988 and was escorted by one of Massoud's senior officers, Ahmad Muslem Hayat, to the mujahideen base at Farkhar, in Takhar province.[2] He spent two days trying to persuade Massoud, telling him that the Soviet leader was waiting for his call, but Massoud refused the offer and he left empty-handed.

A few days later, Massoud recorded in his diary that the Russians had asked to meet him personally. Wary of the political complications it would cause him with his own party leader, Rabbani, and other mujahideen leaders, Massoud

delayed. He called a meeting of his commanders, who were opposed to any deal with the Russians.

> Abdul Hamid Muhtat, whom I met a few days ago in this same room, sent me news that the deputy foreign minister of Afghanistan; the Russian ambassador, Mr [Yuli] Vorontsov; and the commander-in-chief of the Russian forces in Afghanistan, General [Valentin] Varennikov wished to meet me in the Panjsher. This invitation was one of numerous invitations which the two above-mentioned persons [Vorontsov and Varennikov] had made to me before having extended the same invitation to Professor Rabbani. For a variety of reasons, I did not accept any of these invitations, and even now I am uncertain whether or not I should meet Vorontsov and Varennikov until I speak to Professor Rabbani and find out how his talks with them have gone.
>
> Given Gorbachev's recent plans and that the Russians have held direct secret talks with Rabbani and a delegation of various parties, I do not see that my meeting will make any difference. Nevertheless, I will give it full consideration before making a decision.

Eventually Massoud did meet them. He evidently refused any collaboration with the Afghan communist government but did later guarantee the Russians safe passage on their way out of Afghanistan: 'The Russians insistently asked to see me. After written and spoken exchanges, finally and with great caution I did agree to meet the Russians Vorontsov and Varennikov.' Writing in his diary on 26 Jodi 1367 [16 January 1989], Massoud recorded the outcome:

> Our talks with the Russians failed. After this, Yuli Vorontsov, the Russian ambassador, announced that if a political solution for Afghanistan could not be found, the withdrawal of the Russian forces would have to be postponed. This announcement was supported by Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet foreign minister, who was then in Kabul. He added that in such a case the Russians would have to increase their support for the current [communist] regime in Afghanistan.

Massoud continued, 'I received another message from the Russians asking for an agreement that we would not interfere with their forces during a withdrawal. I replied to them through the Panjsheri governor, Daoud, who was our main liaison with the Russians, that I would guarantee that they would not be harassed.' After discussing military problems involving both allied mujahideen parties and hostile rival organisations – above all, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hisb-i-Islami – Massoud wrote, 'Eventually, we sorted this problem out.' He then turned to the bigger picture:

> This is a crucial time for us, and every day and hour matters, because our revolution is coming to fruition. The Russians are pulling out, and everybody within Afghanistan and internationally knows

that the regime will not last.

The leaders in Peshawar are thinking about putting together a broad-based transitional government. The Hisb-i-Islami, meanwhile, is trying hard to gain advantage by sending people and ammunition to places already liberated or about to be liberated.

For my part, I am worried what would happen to this country if the Kabul regime fell quickly, as it did in Taloqan and Kunduz. What sort of government would emerge, and how would the acute differences between the parties be resolved?

Secondly, if the regime did not fall immediately, and was able to fend off the disorganised attacks of the mujahideen, what, in this case, would be the position? Would Pakistan, and the other countries that have ably supported the mujahideen so far, continue to cooperate with us? And what would happen within the country?

I am much preoccupied with these two conflicting possibilities and pessimistic about the future. The only thing that gives me hope is the belief that God in His infinite mercy will help us, and that in practice I will be able to count on the work of the Shura-i-Nazar.

The question is whether the shura has the ability to carry out this task. My answer is yes, firstly because it controls 70 per cent of the strategic territory, and we can cut the resupply routes in Paghman and north of Kabul if necessary.

Secondly, because the shura, compared to the other groups, is superior in numbers, arms, technical experts, and discipline.

Thirdly, because we have always had many plans in hand, and we are ready to implement them. We have always thought it necessary to educate people politically and culturally while fighting our battles.

Our only problem is how quickly we will be able to implement these plans. I hope that in these days, when we are so close to great changes, we will be capable of working to the point that the shura will be the most important factor in the future of this country.

He is God
Saturday night, 10.1367
[1.1989],
11:12 p.m.
Piu

Thank God I have been successful in changing my pattern of work. We haven’t always been successful in countering the enemies of Islam, and the Muslims have often been humiliated. I wanted to change this, but in order to serve Islam I must avoid actions which are totally against God and Islam. Our enmity with the unbelievers should not make me choose actions which are against Islam. God help me.

He is God
Thursday night
5.10
[25.1.1989]

Since 1 Dalv [21 January], Russian jets from across the border and Afghan jets from airfields in

Mazar-i-Sharif and Bagram have been constantly bombing the regions held by the Shura-i-Nazar, including the Panjsher. Sometimes they have missed their target; at other times some villages have been damaged, such as Khost-i-Fereng. We still do not know the number of casualties. The reason for these new attacks is my refusal to give a written guarantee to the Russians that I will not harass their troops when withdrawing through Salang. I offered a verbal guarantee and refused to give a written one. The Russians had no confidence in a verbal agreement and attacked the Salang highway. Now Radio Kabul blames us for the shortages of food in Kabul and reminds the Shura-i-Nazar that it, the shura, was responsible for breaking off negotiations.

Tomorrow, at 6 a.m., we begin operations against the territory of Sayed Jamal [a Hekmatyar commander]. Our groups will attack on five fronts. For this operation we have assembled 700 mujahideen, five BM-1s [recoilless rifles], five cannons, and ten pieces of 82 mm-calibre artillery. We will also simultaneously attack Chal and Sayyad districts in order to prevent the enemy from moving forces to support Jamal. We are also sending groups to Taloqan to occupy Hisb-i-Islami positions when the town is evacuated.

A safe house
11.11.1367
[31.1.1989]

The battle against Sayed Jamal was a disaster. We were badly defeated: we lost men and weapons, and it was a humiliation for the Shura-i-Nazar.

The attack on Namakau, which was controlled by Sayed Jamal, was going smoothly, and was about to enter the second stage, when my commander saw that Jamal's defenders had abandoned the position at the top of the mountain that had been in the hands of the Hisb-i Islami. He got in touch with me and initially asked for help, but then changed his request. I told him to ask for support from the Panjsher group, but he said they were too far away. He said he had sixty fighters and two wounded. Morale in the group was bad. From what he said, I inferred that he wanted to withdraw, and I was about to tell him to do so when communications broke down. Later on, I received a report that the enemy had ambushed them from behind and had taken prisoners and weapons.

I received a report from Taloqan that the group that was supposed to attack from Kham Khayran village fled after encountering a little resistance.

I heard nothing from commander Sayed Yahya until around 3 p.m., when news came in that the group had been ambushed before reaching its target and the men had scattered and fled. We could have occupied Nahr Ab, but that would not have been of any use for Dahane Sefid, so the group withdrew.

The group that was to have occupied Shakh Palang achieved its objective but, because it was not supported from Dahane Sefid and Kham Khayran, it was ambushed, and only one survived out of the thirty fighters. The rest were either killed or taken prisoner in Namakau district.

The attack on Chal was unsuccessful. In this battle, we lost around fifty people, killed or taken prisoner, and a great deal of weaponry.

Losing these battles caused irreparable losses, not least to our reputation, because we had launched these attacks. We should examine what factors caused us to start this fighting.

Sayed Jamal has always caused trouble for us in Farkhar, Namakau, Taloqan, and Ishkamish. He

has combined with two other groups of the Hisb-i-Islami to make problems for us. They now occupy ground along the routes [linking] Farkhar–Taloqan, Namakau, and Farkhar–Ishkamish districts. Commander Jamal and his brother have always resorted to brutality and violence to dominate the area. They have habitually killed people, stole property, and generally terrorised the villages. The atrocities of Jamal and Maulvi Sayyad have driven people to flee with their families to territory controlled by Jamiat. At this moment, we have around 500 families seeking refuge.

The headquarters have been under pressure from Jamal's depredations, but were always held back by other considerations. On a number of occasions, they drew up a good plan to deal with him, but some factors always intervened, and the leadership opted to give empty promises to the people affected.

Our recruitment in Kabul and other regions is satisfactory. Recently, Hakim Sadiqi, Abdul Samad, Jalil, and Rashid Tatar – who lead government battalions in Rostaq and Chah Ab – have been in touch with us. If all goes well, Jamiat will become militarily stronger in these districts, and this will have a beneficial effect in Takhar, Kunduz, and Badakhshan.

This year we have recruited well from various tribes in Baghlan. If one or two government battalions in Baghlan join us, we will form the majority in Baghlan, as we do in other northern districts. A number of government officers are in contact with Mullah Ezzat [and] Sufi Rasool, —— and we hope to take advantage of this.

The government and the Russians continuously announce that the shura refuses to negotiate with them about access through Salang. As a result, the prestige of the shura has risen greatly among the people.

The committees I set up to oversee various matters are working well, notably the Cultural and Educational Committee and the Finance Committee, but the Political Committee and Military Committee need strengthening.

The second commanders' course in Pakistan is coming to an end, and 150 officers will graduate from both the first and second courses. From these, about fifty will make good commanders. From all the officers on these courses, we will be able to use seventy commanders for the army. I ordered some of my Panjsheri colleagues to go immediately to the Panjsher and prepare a list for the first Panjsheri battalion.

[Baz Mohammad] Ahmadi [one of Massoud's elite commanders] set out for Badakhshan to draw up a list for a Badakhshani battalion. After a few days, I will send committees to Takhar, Kunduz, and Baghlan to look for volunteers, even though we have already selected people for the 5th Battalion and they have completed the training course. This year we have distributed about 10,000 Kalashnikovs and have strengthened the northern regions. We have been able to distribute weapons to all the fronts on a scale better than the previous year. This year we liberated Jorm, Baharak, Qasham, Andarab, the Panjsher, and Taloqan, and put them under the control of the shura. Our logistic supply has been much better this year, but has not reached the level we need. Although the main fighting has not yet started, we have already exhausted our supplies.

From the point of view of funding, we do not have a problem this year. It has also been good from a political point of view, because we have been able to reach agreements with various commanders in the country. We have also been able to reorganise the active zones and the central committees. We have not been very successful militarily because of poor resupply.

Badakhshan should have fallen and come under the control of Jamiat; Kunduz should have faced a serious threat and fallen as soon as the Russians left.

Our Islamic army, with a regiment of at least 2,000 men, should have been ready.

Headquarters
Monday evening, 16–17.11.1367
[5–6.2.1989]

The Russians have announced that their forces have completely left Kabul. Western journalists in Kabul say that there is a battalion of Russian paratroopers at the Khwaja Rawash airfield [at Kabul airport].

Shevardnadze's two days of talks in Pakistan came to nothing. Both sides agreed, however, to address the dilemma of Afghanistan by political means. In the meantime, Vorontsov held talks with the Iranian authorities in Tehran, because relations between Iran and Russia have improved considerably.

Yesterday, after the departure of the Russians from Kabul, Hisb-i-Khalq ['Communist Khalqi Party'] held a big demonstration and announced that it was prepared to continue fighting. Najibullah said that the war was one of life or death. Hekmatyar said that he had received assurances that, after the departure of the Russians, Kabul would fall without fighting.

In these two days, the Pakistanis sent two separate messages: one expressed their sorrow over the events at Salang and sought to remind Professor [Rabbani] of the $2 million they had sent for the families of the dead fighters; the second was about me, saying I was invited to attend the mujahideen shura in Pakistan; in the event that I was not able to attend, they asked me to send a representative.

Professor had already spoken to me about this suggestion and brought me up to date. Professor asked me if Maulvi Saheb Abdul Latif might attend in my place, if I had no objection. Professor also asked me if I were prepared to become minister of defence or minister of the interior. I said the decision was his. There was no mention of the money.

Several days ago, a military transport aircraft fled to Pakistan. We alerted Ahmad Zia. Unfortunately, the aircraft crashed, and we still do not know why. Mulla Ezzat Paghman was in charge of communicating with the pilot.

Today I went to the cultural committee from Piu, and thence to the headquarters. I read the first copy of the newspaper the committee had printed. It was not particularly outstanding but, because it was the first newspaper for us, we were pleased. We also convened the first teachers' seminar, which I dare say was the first in Afghanistan. Most of the teachers came from the Panjsher and Mazar-i-Sharif, and they numbered fifty. But we are still without schoolrooms and books etc. The rooms were damp and there were no benches. Professor [Pohan] Saheb was very upset about this. I hope that we can rectify this situation. This evening I visited the instructors of the commanders' course. I learned a lot from them. I asked the instructors to draw up a list of the officers, noting their intelligence and their approach to discipline. When they have taken their exams, I will allocate duties.

Tomorrow, God willing, after meeting those who have completed the military course, I am going to meet the responsible commanders of Farkhar and Warsaj, and will leave dealing with Sayed Jamal to them. From Warsaj I will go south, where there is much to be done.

Wednesday evening

According to the Russians and international journalists, today the last Russian soldiers left Afghanistan, defeated, after an occupation of nine years. General B [Boris Gromov], the overall commander of the Russian forces in Afghanistan, crossed the Hairatan Bridge partly by jeep and partly on foot.[3]

For some time, the international media has predicted that, after the withdrawal of the Russians, the regime of Dr Najib would collapse, either through internal coup d'état or at the hands of the mujahideen.

The heads of the parties resident in Pakistan are busily trying to put together a temporary government to take over when Najib falls. These leaders acted under pressure from Pakistan, and from others who had supported the mujahideen, to form a national shura in Rawalpindi. Each party was to send sixty representatives.

The Shia parties resident in Iran were also to send representatives with 100 guards. [The mujahideen leaders] Gulbuddin [Hekmatyar], [Younus] Khalis, and [Abdul Rasul] Sayyaf disagreed with the proposed number of Shia representatives, and the shura collapsed without any result.

According to reports I have received, in the next few days, the Pakistanis, seeking to take advantage of the political vacuum, intend to launch a major attack against Jalalabad with the help of Hisb-i-Islami.

In my opinion, the attack on Jalalabad, which would be the biggest battle since the Russians withdrew, would be crucial for the regime. If the regime were defeated, the will to resist in Kabul and elsewhere would weaken, probably leading to an internal coup d'état. If the reverse happened, the regime's self-confidence would be strengthened. The regime is aware of the proposed assault and has begun a propaganda campaign claiming that Pakistan intended to occupy Afghanistan.

A number of mujahideen commanders in and around Kabul, such as Abdul Haq, who have absolutely no armed forces at all, are hoping that when the regime implodes, people from the government will approach them for help and they will enter Kabul to secure the city.

For some time, Gulbuddin [Hekmatyar] said that, in order to prevent bloodshed, he would not attack Kabul, because he had in mind to mount a Hisb-i-Islami-inspired coup d'état.

In Peshawar, Hisb-i-Islami and Sayyaf were wary about us because they thought we may bring about a coup d'état in Kabul or do a deal. In my opinion, none of the mujahideen parties or commanders around Kabul has a military plan to occupy Kabul. The truth is that not one of them has the military capability or military understanding to carry out this type of operation. They hope that when Jalalabad falls, Kabul will fall too. For example, some time ago, Maulvi Jalaluddin and Maulvi Arsala told me that they wanted to move their forces towards Kabul without first taking Khost and Gardez. This shows to what extent they do not understand what is involved in occupying a city.

I hear reports that the Khalqis or Hisb-i-Islami are about to mount a coup d'état. I think this is improbable in the current situation. The fact that Najib was in the KHAD for some time and continued to enjoy Russian support made the prospect of a coup d'état unlikely.

An account of the past few days of our work:

After meeting the Farkhar leaders, I appointed Commander Gadda Mohamad Khan to deal with Sayed Jamal. He is to skirmish with Jamal via Namakau, Dahane, and Howze-ye Chahar. We want to weaken him gradually.

From the approximately 130 men in our base at Farkhar, I chose 100 under the leadership of Dr Saheb Mushahed, and despatched them towards Khwajeh Ghar. I gave Dr Saheb 60 lakh [6,000,000 afghanis] and I will send ammunition later. Dr Saheb's primary objective will be to establish order at Khwajeh Ghar and Greater Kukcheh, as well as making contact with Abdul Samad, Hakimi, Rashid Tatar, Jalil, Mullah Piram, and Soroush. We hope to persuade them to join us.

I had a meeting with those who were to attend the officers' course.

Together with colleagues, I am organising the formation of the 5th and 10th Battalions.

As usual, I held meetings with different committees.

Friday evening

God willing, tomorrow I would like to go to Khanegah and Tarasht, and the day after from Kotal towards the south. In the south, I am to meet my Andarab colleagues, who have been waiting for me for over a month. I hope that when I arrive I will not find that they have already left in a sulk. I shall also meet colleagues from Kunduz, Khost, and Ishkamish.

I said goodbye to Commander Saheb Alam Khan of Mazar-i-Sharif and Fahim Khan. Fahim Khan will lead the group comprising Kafil Makhdoum Balool and Arshad Farid Khan of Samangan, with the help of another group sent by Ustad. Both groups will try to bring about union with Maulvi Alam Khan and Khalil Khan.

I held talks with Shamsurahman Khan and the others, and set out their duties so that, when I am not there, there will be no problems among them.

This is an account of the money I distributed today:

- 180 lakh for the army;
- 70 lakh for Commander Alam Khan. I instructed Alam Khan to provide living quarters and shelter, including carpets etc., for one month for 500 mujahideen;
- 100 lakh for Shamsurahman Khan, to provide a Badakhshan battalion of 500 men with supplies for one month. From the same budget, I instructed him to give each mujahid 2,000 afghanis in cash for their daily necessities such as boot polish, soap, toothbrushes, etc.;
- 10 lakh for Dr Saheb in Taloqan;
- 20 lakh for Khalil Khan;
- 20 lakh for Khalid, for the use of the committees. Fortunately, Khalid has a little money left over.

In Peshawar, they are still squabbling over the formation of a new government. According to Professor [Rabbani], the formation of a government is certain, and Ahmad Shah [Ahmadzai, a deputy to Rabbani in Jamiat-i-Islami at the time] should take part in forming the government. Professor [Rabbani] is wary of Hekmatyar and the latter's talk of provoking a coup d'état in Kabul. Professor [Rabbani] also mentioned that my name had not yet been included in the cabinet. I had asked him earlier not to put my name forward, because a number of my rivals did not want me to hold any important position. On the other hand, the situation of the future government is very vague. I do not agree that the regime will automatically fall to the mujahideen.

This evening, the BBC reported that, according to General Najib and General Vorontsov, the Kabul regime has been in touch with the mujahideen. I am uncertain whether this is enemy propaganda or whether there is something afoot. If there is something in this news, it must be Hisb-i-Islami that is in touch with the Kabul regime, because they have previously had contact with the regime. The BBC

said that Najib has sent emissaries to Zahir Shah.

Piu
Saturday evening

Today I was busy with some problems and could not leave for Khanegah. I will go tomorrow. For two days, I have had no communication with the Panjsher. There is no obvious reason for this. This has never happened before, and I am very worried. I had news from Taloqan today: the government forces have left Greater Kukcheh. Apart from Ai Khanum, the remaining militias have now joined Jamiat-i-Islami.

This evening, Radio Kabul announced that the government had declared a state of emergency. The BBC said that tanks were on the move, and that armed men had been posted on the roofs.

The BBC said that the shura, which was held in Islamabad after the departure of the Russians, appointed Maulvi Mohammad Nabi as the head of state and Ahmad Shah [Ahmadzai] as prime minister. The Shia parties were not included in this shura, and Radio Iran warned that if the interests of the Shia were not accommodated, there would be civil war.

The next entry comes after the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan on 15 February 1989.

Tarasht
Sunday night
30.11.1367
[19.2.1989]

At 10:30 a.m. I set out from Piu, heading for Khanegah. I reached there at midday. Maulvi Saheb Sayed Akbar (the head of the council of Ulama), Maulvi Saheb Mohammad Eshaq Farkhar, and Maulvi Abdul Hadi Tagab had come a few days ago from Kabul to meet me here. We began talks immediately. They did not have anything special to tell me, but they took up a lot of my time. I met Pohan Saheb, the headmaster. We ate together. He raised a number of problems, and I took note. I met a number of the elders, who said they wanted a mosque in Khanegah. We chose a beautiful site. I asked them to make sure that this land did not belong to anyone. They assured me that the land had been endowed as waqf [a charitable endowment under Islamic law]. I said that I would arrange for civil engineers to come from the Panjsher to begin the work.

Towards the afternoon, the cultural committee came to see me, and for the first time in my life I cut a ribbon. I inspected the activities of the different branches of the committee, such as the film studio and the library. Although the committee was new and its members were inexperienced, they had done a very good job. After dinner, I set out for Tarasht, and now, at 12:07 a.m., I am writing this entry.

Snow has begun to fall again, and with this weather I do not know whether or not we can cross the pass.

It has now been confirmed that – as well as Ai Khanum – Colonel Abdul Samad, Colonel Hakim Sadiqi, Colonel Mirza Abdul Hakim, and Lieutenant Colonel Rashid Tartar have all surrendered to Jamiat.

...

Khanegah
Monday evening,
1.12.1367
[20.2.1989]

Last night, we were in Tarasht when heavy snow began to fall. The following morning, we all agreed that it was not possible to go on. We decided to return to Khanegah after having breakfast at Dr Moshahed's house.

Today I am at Haji Saheb Saleh's house reading books, because there is not much else we can do. We are waiting for better weather.

According to international radio reports, our leaders in Peshawar have not been able to reach agreement, and the conference there is in disarray. I have little expectation of the conference in Islamabad either. Knowing Hekmatyar and the others, I doubt that any agreement can be reached and, if it were, I doubt that it would be for the good of Afghanistan.

Sultan Shireh
Saturday, 7.12
[26.2]

On the afternoon of 4 Hout [23 February], we left Khanegah for Tarasht. We travelled by car for half the way; thereafter, we went on foot. We stopped for the night, and at 4 a.m. we set off for the Farang pass. We were a long caravan, travelling with laden mules; I rode on horseback. We were eighty strong, many being porters. My colleagues were between thirty-five and forty men. Some went to the Panjsher; a smaller number stayed with me in Kheilab.

The weather was less cold, but snow lay everywhere.

I rode for an hour and a half, and dismounted at the foot of the pass because it was not possible to ride. I gave my horse to a man to take down. I was obliged to walk up to the pass, and was worried that I might not be able to do so, because I was not fit. Fortunately, after three hours and forty-five minutes, by 9 a.m., I reached the top of the pass. As we descended from the pass, we were met by a Russian-made car, which took us to Kheilab. Towards evening, we reached the bridge of Sultan Shireh.

I was late meeting my Andarab and Kunduz colleagues; the former had been waiting forty days, the latter seven days. That evening I had a long talk with Arianpour and Dr ——. They were unhappy at my delay but knew nothing of the problems I had experienced with Sayed Jamal, which had held me up. I explained the matter at length. I will spend some time here, so that I can meet all the units from Andarab and Kunduz.

Samand Ab
2.12.1367
[21.2.1989][4]

Last Tuesday, the mujahideen attack on Jalalabad began under the direction of the Pakistanis.[5] The

Pakistanis wanted Zahed from Hisb-i-Islami to lead the attack. This was agreed to by Maulvi Khalis, who had the strongest forces in the east. Maulvi wanted Abdul Qadir to be the overall commander. The Pakistanis wanted Kashmir from Hekmatyar's group to attack from Kunar. No one agreed with this, but they decided to attack from the east on three fronts – Khoghiani, Sorkh Rud, and Shinwar.

According to international radio reports, the mujahideen were at first successful, especially in part of the airport, but were forced to withdraw because the airfield had been mined. As a result of this latest fighting, a large number of the townsfolk fled to Pakistan. The mujahideen suffered around 150 dead and wounded. On the government side, casualties included two generals and two jet aircraft.

The consequences of this attack

I think the Pakistanis were hoping that by taking Jalalabad, they could easily take Khost and Gardez. Having done so, they could approach Kabul from both the south and the east. After this, they expected that Kabul would collapse and that they could put their pawn, Hekmatyar, in power, and thus hold Afghanistan in their hands. But this came to nought, because they lost heavily.

Victory raised government morale and will bolster the reputation of the government both inside and outside Afghanistan. I do not wish to exaggerate the importance of a single victory, but this one was truly significant.

One of the main reasons for the outcome was that the main mujahideen force inside Afghanistan was not consulted about this attack and, as a result, was not ready. Had it been told earlier, it could have mounted other attacks, which could have produced a very different result, as the enemy would not have been able to concentrate forces at Jalalabad.

The intervention of the Pakistanis was based on their fear that when the war ended, they would no longer have a role to play, and this was confirmed by other sources.[6]

The attack on Jalalabad's implications for us

The battle for Jalalabad was of crucial importance for us too. Had Jalalabad been liberated, we would have deployed our forces to deal with the enemy, which was scattered throughout the area from Jebal Seraj to Kabul. We would have closed the Salang pass and concentrated our forces around Kabul. Now we have time to sort out our logistics and to start the fighting from the north.

The house of Maulvi Saheb, Khost
29.12.1367
[20.3.1989]

When I came here, I recalled that day five years ago, exactly to the month, when, as now, I was on my way from Suchey by way of Andarab towards the Panjsher. We all had some idea of what awaited us in the Panjsher, but not how it would in fact turn out. At that time, we knew that the war would be difficult for us and would delay my plans. Unfortunately, I did not keep a diary in those days, and do not remember everything.

Nobody at that time could have foreseen that for four consecutive years the people of the Panjsher would have to suffer displacement and homelessness. Who would have guessed that after five years the Russians would leave Afghanistan in defeat? We did not know that people would have been able to maintain such a level of resistance.

We had no knowledge of the degree of international support we would enjoy, and we could not have guessed how Russia would change. I am again journeying to the Panjsher; how different things

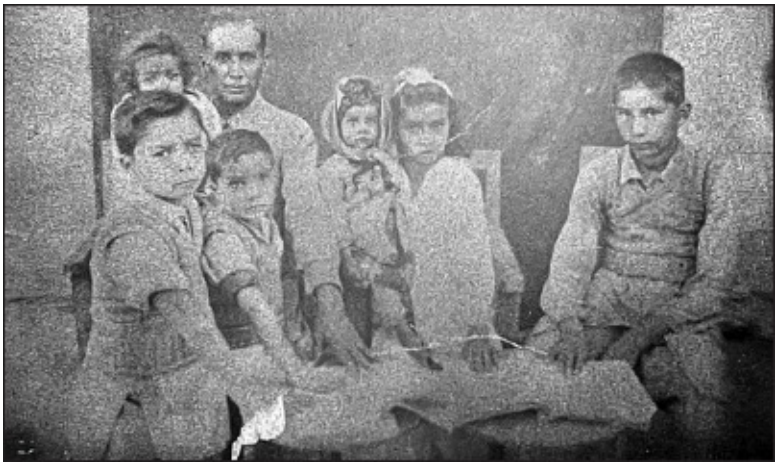
are now. This time, we come with hope and with different plans.

Thank God for His blessings. Before I get to the Panjsher, I have to stop in Andarab to set out a plan for Arianpour's future duties there.

In the Panjsher, I have to reflect and organise an army of 500 men plus 300 men for the heavy weapons; to construct a road between the Panjsher and Chitral; to think about the logistics; and, in general, to think about improving the condition of the people of the Panjsher, Parwan, and Kapisa. I also have to meet some commanders; to talk to some of the government officers; and to set out a programme of duty for the colleagues around Kabul.

If the government looks like it is falling, I will concentrate on the Panjsher and Shomali. If it does not fall, I will have to make different plans for the Panjsher and Shomali.

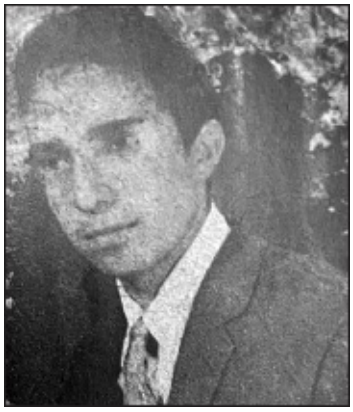
Massoud's parents, Bibi Khorshaid and Col Dost Mohammad. *All photographs on this page courtesy of the Massoud family*



Massoud's family: (front, left to right) Yahya and Massoud; and (back, left to right) Ahmad Zia, Dost

Mohammad, Sohaila, Bibi Sherin, and Din Mohammad.

Massoud (right) at primary school age with his father and elder brother Yahya and, in front, Sohaila and Ahmad Zia.



Massoud in his first year at Kabul Polytechnic Institute.

Massoud, aged twenty-eight, leading prayers in the Panjsher Valley in 1982, when I first met him. The mujahideen would pray five times a day, only being excused in times of battle. *Both photographs by Sandy Gall*

Massoud training local mujhideen in the Namakau Valley, testing their weapons' range, Takhar province, 1986. *Photograph by Sandy Gall*

Massoud in the Namakau Valley, Takhar province, 1986, during his expansion into the north, with (left to right) radio operator Ghulam, Commander Azim, and his bodyguard. *Photograph by Sandy Gall*

Massoud planning the attack on the Farkhar garrison with the use of a sand table constructed by Registani. With him are (front, left to right) Commanders Aman, Panna, Muslem, and Registani; and (back, left to right) Commander Azim and Tajuddin. Takhar province, 1986. *Photograph by Sandy Gall*

Despite the demands of the war, Massoud found time to read and study and to play football and chess, his favourite pastimes, with his men. *Photograph by Reza/Webistan*

A mujahideen arms convoy returning to Pakistan from the Panjsher, 1982. *Photograph by Sandy Gall*

The Roitang Gorge, which guards the entrance to the Panjsher Valley. Massoud blew up the rock face to block a Taliban assault in 1996. *Photograph by Reza/Webistan*

A Russian Mi-8 helicopter making a precarious landing, carrying Russian supplies to the Panjsher. *Photograph by Lt Col Alisher Sharabof, courtesy of Massoud Foundation*

Russian Sukhoi jets bombing very close to our camera team in the Panjsher, 1982. *Photograph by Sandy Gall*

Villagers digging for survivors after Soviet jets bombed the village of Rokha in the Panjsher, 1980. The bombing appeared to be in retaliation for the previous day's attack by the mujahideen on a Russian convoy supplying a garrison nearby. *Photograph by Feireydoun Ganjour*

A destroyed Russian T-62, one of many in the Panjsher Valley, 1982. *Photograph by Sandy Gall*

A young mother from Kunduz, who had just arrived in Pakistan in 1986. The Russians had bombed her

village; they took away all of the men, including her husband, and killed most of them. *Photograph by Sandy Gall*

Massoud, the day after a battle to seize the government fort at Farkhar, Takhar province, 1986. He ran his

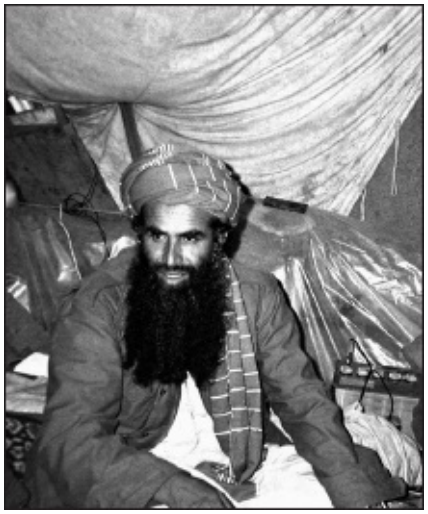
operations mostly by handwritten letter and courier. Here, he has stopped to write a letter at the request of a villager. *Photograph by Sandy Gall*

Mirdad Khan, an official in the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture, was the go-between for the ceasefire between the Russians and Massoud. He was imprisoned and brutally tortured by the communist government for his role. *Courtesy of Massoud Foundation*

Anatoli Tkachev of the Soviet military intelligence agency (the GRU) paying his respects at Massoud's tomb, 2003. *Photograph by Yousef Janesar, courtesy of Massoud Foundation*

Burhanuddin Rabbani at a news conference in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, 2001. *Courtesy of Reuters/Alamy Stock Photo*

Rashid Dostum with his troops near his Kabul base, 1992. *Courtesy of Reuters/Alamy Stock Photo*



Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, Paktia province, 1984. *Courtesy of CPA Media Pte Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo*

Massoud briefs Commander Saleh Registani (left) and Khalid Amiry before the final assault on Kabul. Bagram, April 1992. *Photograph by Reza/Webistan*

Massoud at Bagram Air Base, preparing for his final assault on Kabul, 1992. *Photograph by Reza/Webistan*

Massoud surveys the road near Charikar where the mujahideen were forced to fight a blockade by Hisb-i-Islami forces on the way to taking Kabul, April 1992. With him are (left to right) Commander Bismillah Khan and another Jamiat commander, who is flanked by two Afghan army defectors. *Photograph by*

Reza/Webistan

Massoud (front, second from left) at a press conference near Kabul in May 1992 after signing a peace accord. With him are (front, left to right) Pakistani labour minister Ijaz-ul-Haq, the son of General Zia-ul-Haq; Gulbuddin Hekmatyar; and the Saudi mediator Abdullah Naif. Hekmatyar instructed his chief of intelligence to blow up Massoud's car on his way back to Kabul and then resumed his bombardment of Kabul ten days later. *Photograph by Sami Zubieri/AFP via Getty Images*

Dostum’s Uzbek fighters firing on Hisb-i-Islami forces in south-west Kabul during the mujahideen takeover of the city. Fighting often took place for control of a particular government ministry building. April 1992.
Photograph by Robert Nickelsberg

Boys working for one of the armed groups aligned with the government pumping water on Jade Maiwand, Kabul's former main commercial avenue, during a lull in fighting, March 1994. *Photograph by Robert Nickelsberg*

A woman and her children fleeing fighting in Charikar in 1999 after the Taliban launched an offensive against Massoud's troops. *Photograph by João Silva*

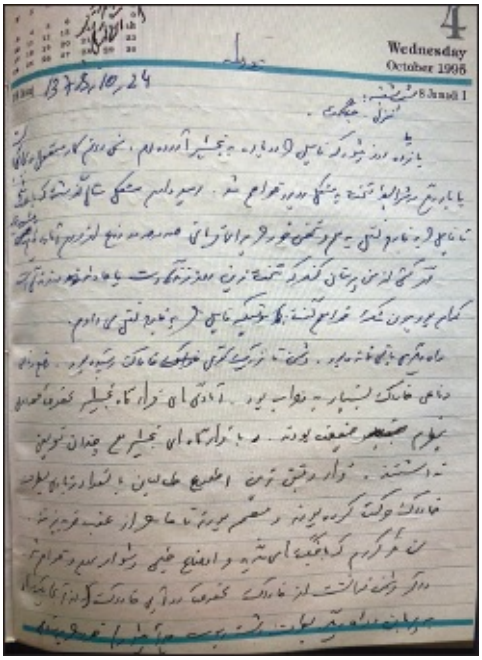
Massoud’s fighters taking cover from Taliban mortars in Karizak, Takhar province, 1999. *Photograph by João Silva*

A Taliban mullah addresses a crowd in Kabul after the Taliban ousted the Rabbani government, 1996.

Photograph by Robert Nickelsberg

Massoud addressing members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg with its president, Nicole Fontaine (right), and Dr Abdullah (left), 2001. © *Communautés Européennes 2001*

Massoud with his six children, (from youngest to eldest) Nasrine, Zora, Aisha, Mariam, Fatima, and Ahmad. *Courtesy of the Massoud family*



A page from Massoud's diary on 1 January 2000. Massoud wrote, 'If someone were to ask me "What was the most difficult day or event of your life?", I would answer by saying "the day I sent my family out of my country".' *Courtesy of Ahmad Massoud*

Ahmad Massoud (second from left) at his father's grave a year after his death, beside Masood Khalili, who

was badly wounded in Massoud's assassination, and Massoud's brother Ahmad Zia (third and fourth from left, respectively). Further to the right is Philippe Morillon, a member of the European Parliament.
Photograph by Reza/Webistan

15

Massoud Captures Kabul

Twelve years after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and after some of the bloodiest fighting seen in the twentieth century, Ahmad Shah Massoud proved himself the outstanding Afghan guerrilla leader to have emerged from the Soviet–Afghan War when he finally captured Kabul. His victory on Wednesday, 29 April 1992 – ahead of his rivals, leading a column of tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and lorryloads of jubilant troops into the centre of the city – was in many ways the apogee of his career.

He ousted Najibullah, the hulking Pashtun former KHAD chief, nicknamed ‘The Ox’, whom the Russians had left in charge. Despite the machinations of Pakistan’s powerful spy agency, the ISI, to gain control of Kabul for its own favourite, the Pashtun extremist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, they were outmanoeuvred by Massoud, who demonstrated his considerable political as well as military skills by creating a winning coalition. He had forecast that it would take three years after the Russian withdrawal to retrain the mujahideen to fight a conventional (as opposed to guerrilla) war and take Kabul from the communists – and it did.

As well as Massoud’s own tough-as-nails Panjsheri mujahideen, the coalition included troops commanded by two government generals, both of whom had defected to him: Abdul Rashid Dostum’s fierce Uzbek militia, known as the Kilim Jam, and Abdul Momen’s well-trained and well-armed regulars.[1] The citizens of Kabul, who had suffered under the heel of the Soviet occupiers and their Afghan communist minions for many years, gave Massoud a hero’s welcome.

The last few weeks of the Najibullah regime were nail-bitingly tense, with Massoud's lifelong enemy, Hekmatyar, desperately trying to win the prize of Kabul for himself. Fierce fighting – pitting Massoud's mujahideen and Dostum's Kilim Jam against Hekmatyar's Hisb-i-Islami fighters allied with communist troops – raged for several days but, by the time Massoud arrived in Kabul, the battle was over.

For Massoud, it was a victorious end to the long, brutal, and bloody nine-year Soviet war – which lasted from 1979 to 1989 – and his even longer battle against communist control in Afghanistan. Much of Afghanistan had been laid waste by the relentless bombing and strafing of the heavily armed Russian invaders. But against all expectations, including those of some Western experts, the Afghan populace and mujahideen not only refused to admit defeat but, in the end, overcame the Russians and forced them to withdraw in failure. Much of the mujahideen's success was due to their ingrained determination to defend their country, come what may – but a large measure of that success can be attributed to the guerrilla genius of Massoud.

As well as being a personal victory, Massoud's capture of the capital was the final victory of the Afghan resistance, and of the decade-long campaign backed by the United States against its rival superpower. It was an irony that Massoud – who had long been marginalised by the ISI (with its own agenda for Afghanistan), the CIA, and the US Department of State – was the one who delivered that victory. The CIA had showered millions of dollars on Hekmatyar, because the president of Pakistan, General Zia-ul-Haq, saw him as 'Pakistan's man' in Afghanistan. Zia dictated ISI policy and, since the Americans were close Cold War allies of Pakistan, they followed suit.[2]

Massoud, however, outsmarted them all with his capture of Kabul, leading Robert Kaplan to famously describe him in the *Wall Street Journal* as 'the Afghan who won the Cold War'.[3] Kaplan, who spent considerable time as a correspondent in Afghanistan for a number of major American publications in the 1980s, described Massoud in glowing terms:

> He must be judged among the greatest guerrilla leaders of the 20th century, shoulder to shoulder with Marshal Tito, Ho Chi Minh, Mao Tse-tung, and Che Guevara. He organised a functioning polity over a sprawling, more difficult terrain, that was under greater military pressure, than those of Mao, Ho, Tito or Che. Most significant, Mr Massoud accomplished this without a severe ideology and its

accompanying human rights violations.[4]

Kaplan added that Massoud got very little help from the United States.

The decisive turning point had come at the beginning of 1992, when President Najibullah tried to replace one of his top commanders, General Momen, who – although Najibullah did not know it – had been in close touch with Massoud for several years. Momen, who was a Tajik, like Massoud, had refused the order, starting a revolt which soon included the most powerful warlord on the government side: General Dostum. At Momen's instigation, the rebel generals had put themselves under Massoud's command. He controlled the border port of Hairatan and, soon afterwards, in March, Dostum's troops had captured Mazar-i-Sharif, the most important city in the north. The writing was on the wall: a few weeks later, Massoud was at the gates of Kabul with Momen at his side.

Watching from London, ITN had scrambled to send three reporting teams to Kabul to cover what seemed to be the imminent fall of the capital. I arrived on the scene just in time and managed to join Massoud at a base at Jebal Seraj outside the city. That day, Massoud had issued an ultimatum to Hekmatyar, calling him up from a captured Russian BTR in Charikar, a small town north of Kabul.

'We had a long talk on the radio,' Massoud told me, 'and I told him, "Stop your men attacking Kabul, or I will enter Kabul myself."' Massoud explained to me, 'If Gulbuddin [Hekmatyar] does not cooperate with the new [mujahideen] government, if he continues to attack the city, and if he does not withdraw his troops, I will enter Kabul myself tomorrow morning.'

'Do you have the troops to do it?' I asked.

'Yes, I have 6,000 troops in Charikar, and tanks and jets in Mazar-i-Sharif and Bagram [Air Base], which I can use against him. Gulbuddin asked me if I was angry. I said, "No, not as angry as you will be later."'

That 'later' would only have to come if Hekmatyar ignored Massoud's ultimatum. Next morning, we heard on the BBC World Service that a 'prominent guerrilla leader', meaning Hekmatyar, was still objecting to the plan for a mujahideen government. It sounded as if confrontation were inevitable.

I sat writing my diary in the garden of the house in Charikar where I was staying – a former KHAD headquarters requisitioned by Massoud's forces. It

was a beautiful spring morning, and the apricot tree beside me was thickly covered with the tenderest pink blossom. The long, harsh Afghan winter was over; the fragile beauty of spring was all around us. But as I enjoyed the sunshine, I wondered: would the spring bring with it a bloody offensive?

Later, a few miles up the road, in the small town of Jebal Seraj, we were standing outside Massoud's headquarters when we heard a clatter of rotor blades as several Russian-built Mi-8 helicopters came swooping in from the direction of Bagram. They were empty, and we soon discovered – as we watched a contingent of troops being marched up the hill – that Massoud was about to carry out his threat to Hekmatyar of airlifting troops into Kabul.

Massoud himself appeared shortly afterwards and confirmed that the troops now embarking were indeed destined for Kabul. After a brief word with the crews, he said a prayer, and then the Mi-8s started their engines and took off; they climbed towards the sunlit, snow-covered Hindu Kush mountains before turning south towards Kabul.

As Massoud and I walked down the hill together, he explained, 'I'm sending my men to Kabul not to attack the city, but to control it. Gulbuddin does not agree with my proposals.' In other words, Hekmatyar had rejected Massoud's ultimatum calling on him to stop attacking the capital and to join the interim government.

Hekmatyar's latest attempt to take Kabul relied on his customary approach of intrigue backed by force. Having failed to engineer a political coup against the communist President Najibullah in 1990 – despite having the help of the turncoat defence minister, General Shahnawaz Tanai, and the Pakistani ISI – the wily Hekmatyar was now attempting a military-style coup.

In the last days of Najibullah's tottering regime, several hundred of Hekmatyar's Hisb-i-Islami fighters had infiltrated Kabul, where, with the connivance of Tanai, they had been armed and sent to seize key points in the city. It was this attempt by Hekmatyar to take Kabul from within that had provoked Massoud's ultimatum and led to his subsequent decision to fly in troops. Massoud also alerted General Dostum, his ally in the north, and persuaded him to fly in several hundred of his tough Kilim Jam.

In the weeks leading up to this final frantic period before the fall of Kabul, the United Nations special envoy Benon Sevan had been desperately trying to

organise the resignation of Najibullah and the transfer of power to a group of ‘the great and the good’ – mainly exiled Afghan intellectuals. The scheme was bound to be a failure, because Sevan had consulted none of the main players – the mujahideen commanders in general, and Massoud in particular. Sevan’s group of leaders had no legitimacy in the eyes of people like Massoud, because, without exception, all of its members had sat out the war and remained in Pakistan or the West – in Peshawar or California – and also because they were mainly Pashtun, whereas Massoud and his closest allies – such as the generals Momen and Dostum – were northerners, Tajiks or Uzbeks. But the most fatal flaw of all in the United Nations plan was that neither Massoud nor any of the other commanders were prepared to see the hated Najibullah, who had the blood of thousands of mujahideen on his hands, escape so easily.

Sevan had returned from Kabul empty-handed, and on the night of 15 April, as the noose tightened, Najibullah had tried to make a run for it. But he had not made it to the airport, where a United Nations plane had been waiting to fly him to Delhi. Warned by one of his generals that the airport was in the hands of Dostum’s Kilim Jam, Najibullah had headed instead for the United Nations compound, where he had sought political asylum.

A few days later, when Hekmatyar started mortaring Kabul airport, my dashing young cameraman, Nigel Thomson, had been hit in the shoulder by a jagged piece of shrapnel, requiring an operation to remove it at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) hospital. This had left Nigel hors de combat for a few days. Luckily, the highly experienced Paul Carleton was also in the ITN team and had been able to replace Nigel, whom we had sedated that night with a bottle of Johnnie Walker Red Label bought for $100 at the bar of the Intercontinental. It was just as well that Paul was available. The next day, 29 April 1992, would prove to be the most significant day of the Afghan war: the day Massoud took Kabul.

Early that morning, Carleton and I, accompanied by the French-Iranian photographer Reza, set off driving north to Bagram Air Base, which was Massoud’s operational headquarters. Without Reza, I don’t think we would ever have made it. Soon after leaving Kabul, we came to the first roadblock, which Massoud himself must have set up to prevent anyone obstructing his access to Kabul. The sentry called the guard commander, who listened unenthusiastically

to the explanation Reza gave for our journey. He was still looking resistant, and had just opened his mouth to say something, when Reza seized his hand, shook it warmly, thanked him, and climbed back in the car. As we drove off, he laughed.

‘Did you see that? I shook hands with him before he could say no. He wasn’t at all happy about letting us through.’

More roadblocks followed, these ones manned by Hekmatyar’s rival Hisb-i-Islami, but they were surprisingly friendly. At one, a long discussion and a mile-long detour off the main road turned out to be nothing more serious than a lift for two commanders. As we all made ourselves small to accommodate the large, hairy, heavily armed, and strongly smelling commanders, we became aware that three or four other armed mujahideen were climbing into the boot of the car, also intent on hitching a ride. When prompted, they vacated the boot with unexpectedly good humour, rather like naughty children who had been caught misbehaving. At the next roadblock, it became even more of a squeeze when we were asked to take to Bagram two small boys and a car battery, the latter presumably for recharging.

We reached Bagram at about 1 p.m., passing a long line of Massoud’s tanks, BTRs, and troop-carrying lorries parked by the side of the road, facing south. I counted nearly 100 vehicles; the crews were enjoying the sunshine and having lunch. I asked some Panjsheris, sitting cross-legged on the grass around a huge pot of rice, where Massoud was. They pointed in the direction of the base and invited us to join them. We politely declined. They must have known they were about to drive on Kabul; morale was obviously high.

Fifteen minutes later, we were outside Massoud’s headquarters, and I was able to snatch a quick word with him before he drove off.

‘Are you going to Kabul today?’ I asked in French.

‘Yes, later.’

‘Can we come with you?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘How will you travel? In a BTR?’

‘Yes, probably.’

‘Can we come with you?’

‘I will give you a BTR for yourselves.’ He grinned, and the jeep shot off. We followed, bumping our way across what had been the Russians’ biggest base in

Afghanistan. We finally caught up with him standing on a flat roof, peering through his binoculars in the direction of Kabul. As soon as he saw us, he called Reza up to join him and questioned him closely about the road. When Reza told him we had seen some men digging trenches beside the road, Massoud paced up and down, deep in thought. When he climbed down, I asked him for an interview.

'Not now, a little later,' he replied. But I knew that on a day like this there was no time like the present, so I kept talking. Carleton, being an old pro, started walking backwards with the camera on his shoulder, filming while Reza translated. Walking backwards holding a heavy television camera is not only difficult but often dangerous, unless there is someone – usually the sound man – to guide the cameraman. But we had no sound man, and at one point were walking beside a ditch. Somehow, Carleton pulled it off – a real tour de force. Massoud took it all in his stride too. I asked him if he anticipated any trouble in Kabul. He said there might be some trouble on the road, but he did not think there would be any in the city.

'Kabul is free,' he said, 'and I am going to see my troops there.'

I asked him if he ever thought, when he began his resistance struggle in 1979, that one day he would march into Kabul.

'I always thought this government would collapse and we would be the first people into the city.'

'This must be a very happy day for you,' I said in conclusion. We had run out of space and come to a halt. He did not reply, but his face was radiant. Then, after giving two young mujahideen what seemed to be last-minute instructions, he led the way into another headquarters building, where a group of Afghan army officers, including General Momen, were waiting to receive him. At first, we were shown to a separate room and offered tea, but a few minutes later, obviously on Massoud's instructions, we were ushered into the big office next door.

Massoud sat on one side of the room, with his back to the window and one of his senior Panjsheri aides beside him, while occupying the desk at the far end was the Afghan army general whose office this presumably was. It was all very informal. Carleton sat down beside Massoud, and Reza and I opposite him. Various army officers including Momen came and went, all showing Massoud

friendly deference.

I asked Massoud if reports that he had been appointed defence minister were true, but he good-naturedly dodged my questions, insisting that the only official post he held was as head of the Committee for the Security of Kabul, to which he had been appointed by all the mujahideen leaders in Peshawar.

I knew Massoud well, but his relaxed manner amazed me. Here he was, on one of the most important days of his life, the day on which he would, after all these years of combat, enter Kabul in triumph without, he hoped, firing a shot – although there had been a lot of fighting in Kabul in the past few days – and yet he had time to sit down and talk for an hour about the war, past and present. No doubt the presence of Reza, a fellow Persian speaker and someone he knew well, was a help, and I was an old friend too. But it was almost as if he were deliberately speaking for the record, describing how he had been in close contact with various army officers from the start. I asked him when he had first started talking to General Momen.

‘Four years ago.’

‘And to General Dostum?’

‘Two months ago.’

It was the alliance with Dostum that led to the crucial victory, the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif, in March. After that, the final stages of the war went very quickly. Massoud explained why.

‘In the first place, Najibullah thought I would move my forces south, through the Salang – the direct route to Kabul – so he planned to give Charikar and Jebal Seraj to the Hisb-i-Islami so that they would fight us. But we took them by surprise, bringing in our forces from east and west.

‘The second reason was that Najibullah appointed a new general to the Charikar-Bagram area, what they call the “Iron Gate to Kabul”. It was because of this general that we were able to take Charikar and Bagram virtually without a fight. When the people saw that there was no killing and no looting in Charikar, they did not want to fight any more. They realised the mujahideen were just like everyone else.’

At this point General Momen came in and sat, smiling, beside Massoud as he delivered the punchline of the story.

‘When Najibullah received the news that Jebal Seraj and Charikar had fallen,

he thought Hisb-i-Islami had taken them. But when he learned that it was Jamiat that had captured them, he began to shake.' Massoud laughed.

Soon after, the convoy that Massoud was to lead into Kabul – now comprising close on 200 tanks, BTRs, and lorries full of troops – started forming up, and by late afternoon it was ready to roll. Carleton and I were still in our old Volga taxi; Reza had disappeared, and Massoud's promise of giving us our own BTR was forgotten in the excitement of the dash for Kabul. As the shadows began to lengthen, Massoud jumped into his BTR and led the way out of Bagram Air Base at the head of the long column, turning south for Kabul. As we left Bagram, a lone Russian MiG-21 jet fighter did two passes over us, dipping its wings in salute. It seemed like a good omen.

The journey was uneventful, passing through a series of small towns and villages, all friendly. We fell farther and farther behind in the old Volga, despite continued appeals to the equally old driver, who kept saying he could go no faster. Our chance came as the light began to fade. The convoy halted on a rise. Hastily paying off the old Volga driver, and grabbing the camera gear, we ran towards the front of the convoy. Massoud and his commanders were kneeling on the road, saying their evening prayer, the lights of the city twinkling in the distance beyond them. We looked urgently for Massoud's BTR, but failed to see it. As the convoy started revving up for departure, we made a dash for an armoured personnel carrier with space on the flat hull behind its turret. At the last moment, I saw that it was part of the Uzbek detachment, and that each of the two wild-looking Kilim Jam riding shotgun had five RPG rockets strapped to his back. I hesitated, but, grinning hugely, they leaned down and hauled me and our equipment up on the flat deck, while Carleton ran back to get a shot of Massoud praying. He ran there and back all in fifteen or twenty seconds, it seemed, and had just jumped back on board when we started with an almighty jerk.

We clung on desperately as the driver raced to the front of the convoy, Carleton shooting some exciting pictures of the speeding column as we climbed the long slope to Khair Khana, the gateway to Kabul from the Shomali Plain.

As the lights of the city came into full view, the Kilim Jam in the nearest BTR went wild, firing 30 mm cannons into the air in jubilation. All around us, the sky was full of red tracer as the mujahideen celebrated their arrival in Afghanistan's capital. The din was terrific. Kabul was theirs.

16

Under Siege: Massoud in Kabul

When I drove into Kabul with Massoud on that April evening in 1992 at the head of his victorious column of mujahideen, government troops, tanks, and armoured personnel carriers, hopes were high that peace had finally come to Afghanistan. After fourteen years of fighting, the Afghans were profoundly war-weary.

Within a day or two, Kabul was en fête. In Chicken Street, the famous shopping district, the markets were crammed with food. Flower stalls were ablaze with roses. People thronged the streets, and restaurants and tea-houses were full.

Thousands of refugees were pouring back into Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran, where they had been surviving in camps for over a decade. It was the biggest population movement in the world at that time, a United Nations official told me when I visited Kabul in July 1992: ‘10,000 a day; 300,000 a month – which is the size of the entire Cambodian refugee problem.’ By the end of the year, 1.5 million Afghans had returned home.

I travelled down to Torkham, the border crossing with Pakistan at the western end of the Khyber Pass, and watched the arrival of high-sided Bedford lorries packed to the brim with refugees and their possessions, from roof poles to cooking pots to cattle and donkeys. Often a couple of charpoys and a bicycle hung over the back. Whole families – as many as fifteen people in each – sat on top, the women clad head-to-toe in burkas. Their homes were in the 14,000 villages scattered across a country the size of France, and most of Afghanistan was now peaceful, the front lines gone, the communist jets grounded.

One would have hoped that, after nine years of brutal and bloody occupation by the Red Army, a newly liberated Afghanistan and its population of 20 million might have enjoyed a period of peace and at least some plenty. But it was not to be. The mujahideen coalition leaders started to quarrel among themselves.

As the distinguished British diplomat Martin Ewans wrote in his account of what happened in Afghanistan after the departure of the Russians, 'The first three years of mujahideen rule, if it could be called that – following Massoud's liberation of Kabul in 1992 – were characterised by a total inability to agree between themselves on any lasting political settlement, and a readiness to fight each other at the slightest provocation, or indeed without any apparent provocation at all.'[1] Ewans declared:

> At the heart of the problem was Hekmatyar, who [was] determined that either he himself should be in charge of any administration which was formed, or, if not, that Kabul should be prevented from becoming a secure base for a government run by those whom he saw as his opponents. It was as unacceptable to the Pashtuns in general, as it was to him, in particular, that Rabbani, Massoud and Dostum – two Tajiks and an Uzbek – should play a leading role in guiding the country's destiny.

The equally distinguished ambassador and great authority on the mujahideen Peter Tomsen, who served as United States special envoy to Afghanistan from 1989 to 1992, pointed out that Hekmatyar was 'one of the main cat's paws' of Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, and Pakistan's drive to control the outcome in Kabul was the main problem. 'The ISI sent forward the artillery and ammunition, ISI officers, and Hekmatyar himself to carry out the shelling of Kabul.'[2]

The Afghans had agreed on a fifty-one-member Islamic Jihad Council, made up of thirty military commanders, ten mullahs and ten intellectuals. President of the Council for the first two months would be Sebghatullah Mujadidi, the scion of a prominent religious family, who had been incarcerated by the communists. He was then to be replaced by an interim government, which would hold power for four months until elections could be held and a permanent government formed. Within days, however, 'this impossibly optimistic scenario', as Ewans described it, collapsed.

Mujadidi wanted to stay on as president for two years. Hekmatyar – who had wanted the presidency for himself, and who was furious that Massoud had

brought about the defeat of the Najibullah regime and snatched away the prize of Kabul when it was almost in his grasp – refused to take up his post as prime minister. Dostum, whose troops helped seize the capital and held Kabul's ancient hilltop fortress, the Bala Hisar, and other strategic positions, was refusing to meet Hekmatyar's demand to withdraw his forces back to his northern base. So, Hekmatyar sat in a base south of the city and fired rockets into the capital – the first of many. In the negotiations that ensued, it was agreed that Hekmatyar would join the government, and a leadership council would be formed under Burhanuddin Rabbani, the leader of Jamiat-i-Islami. Rabbani replaced Mujadidi at the end of June, and Hekmatyar sent one of his deputies to serve as prime minister, but within weeks the arrangement disintegrated.

On 8 August 1992, Hekmatyar unleashed a savage, never-to-be- forgotten rocket attack on the city. Guy Willoughby – a former British regular soldier, now deputy chairman of the Halo Trust, a mine-clearance charity – counted 600 rockets exploding on Kabul 'before breakfast', and then stopped counting. Hundreds of innocent Kabulis – men, women, and children – were killed or wounded. By chance, I had left Kabul for the Panjsher Valley a day or two before the rocket attack.

The rocketing, which became part of life in Kabul, went on intermittently month after month and year after year, wounding and killing hundreds and, ultimately, thousands of people. Hekmatyar was supported by the Pakistani government, which wanted its man in power in Afghanistan at any price. But one man's rancorous ambition to rule Afghanistan brought normal life to a standstill, closed the airport, and forced foreign diplomats and United Nations staff to flee for their lives.[3]

Massoud sought to isolate and neutralise Hekmatyar. Dostum was less diplomatic. When a friend and I had dinner with Dostum at his Qala-i-Janghi ('House of War') fortress in Shiberghan in July 1992, and I asked him if he would ever accept Hekmatyar as president, he said, 'If Gulbuddin Hekmatyar becomes president, there will be bloodshed in Afghanistan.' Then, with a grim smile, he added, 'He will never be president.'[4]

Some of those in Kabul who had lived under communism for fourteen years, with everything that it had brought – Soviet-style education and culture, women in the workplace, vodka in the shops – were horrified at the arrival of the

mujahideen. Many who had been tied to the Russian and communist governments left the country, and a considerable diaspora settled in Moscow. Indeed, some of the mujahideen were rough and illiterate, and some were hard line fundamentalist Muslims who viewed the communists as treacherous and city ways as debauched. Massoud, however, was a moderating influence among them, preventing an attempt by Rabbani to ban women from reading the news on television and from the workplace in general. I remember walking down the street with Ahmad Muslem Hayat and spotting a woman walking ahead of us in some very fancy shoes. 'You see, people can wear what they like now,' Muslem said.

But for all the euphoria of defeating communism and taking the capital, the harsh realities of establishing order and running a country soon set in. 'Driving through Afghanistan today takes you across a land ravaged by fourteen years of war,' I wrote at the time. 'Whole villages lie in ruins, bridges are down, roads ripped to shreds by tanks and pitted with shell-holes; the entire country turned into one vast minefield.'

'We are facing enormous difficulties,' Massoud told me when I interviewed him in July. 'It is no use the world saying "we will give you assistance as soon as you have established security and stability". This is the time the new government should be supported to ensure security and stability, and to pay the army and police.'

Massoud's own party, Jamiat-i-Islami, had paid its 25,000 troops in the Kabul area only once since March – 30,000 afghanis for married men and 20,000 Afghanis for single men.[5] 'And they are lucky,' said Massoud. 'Most of the other parties haven't paid their people anything.'

I knew then what is even more obvious now, that the West should have stepped in to help the Afghans with comprehensive security and economic assistance in 1992. In a magazine article for the *Sunday Telegraph* after my trip, I wrote:

> It is important for Afghanistan, and the West, that Massoud succeeds, because only he at the moment appears able to pull the country back from the edge of the abyss. He deserves support because he is pro-Western and a moderate. He wants an Islamic society because, he says, that is what the majority of Afghans want. But he has no interest in a Khomeini-style regime.
>
> He is grateful for British help in fighting the Russians, but he feels he has more than repaid the debt by playing a decisive part in forcing the Russians to withdraw and, as a result, helping to bring

about the collapse of the entire communist system. He argues that Western support now for the government of which he is the driving force will bring stability to the whole area, enable free elections to be held in the next one to two years, and, most importantly for the West, strengthen his hand in curbing the drug traffic. As a good Muslim, he is totally opposed to the use of drugs and is determined to bring opium production under control.

If the West wants to help Afghanistan and to reduce the flow of opium and heroin from Afghanistan and Pakistan, then Ahmad Shah Massoud is their man.[6]

Yet there was pitifully little help. The West had turned away to deal with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the communist era, and the breakup of the Soviet Union. Afghanistan, as one British intelligence official told me, was no longer a priority. The very man who had 'found' Massoud as a potential 'Afghan Napoleon' heard the same message from Massoud that year and, although he had retired from MI6, he sent a report to his old headquarters:

I remember two long interviews I had with him … while Kabul was being shelled by Hekmatyar. Things were edgy, but he [Massoud] was calm and very much in control of himself. We spoke in a mixture of French and Dari – the latter through Dr Abdullah [Abdullah], his right-hand man through the war.

His aim was to pass a message to the British and, through us, I suppose, to the Americans.

Of Massoud, he said:

He was appealing for Western aid, which had virtually ceased following the Soviet withdrawal and the defeat of Najibullah. This was not just arms but also money and general assistance. He pointed out what would happen if the Rabbani government fell, resulting in a full-scale civil war, instability in general, probable terrorism, and so forth, spreading throughout Central Asia, Pakistan, etc., and one that would lead to chaos and suffering in Afghanistan. I reported all this on official channels on return to London. With little or nothing being forthcoming from the powers that be, we know well the result with the rise of the Taliban, [Osama] bin Laden, and the eventual war involving Western troops, casualties, and costs. I strongly believe that, had help been at hand, the recent history of Afghanistan would be very different.[7]

The winter of 1992–3 was a bitter one for the people of Kabul, as the mujahideen parties claimed control of different parts of the city. Hekmatyar continued his relentless bombardment and blocked supplies coming in from Pakistan. To add to the misery, Shia mujahideen of the Hisb-i-Wahdat ['Unity Party'] group backed by Iran began fighting the Ittihad-i-Islami ['Islamic

Union’] group of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, who had backing from Saudi Arabia, as they attempted to seize more territory on the western side of the capital. Kabul, which had survived the Soviet occupation largely intact, was being steadily destroyed. In March 1993, Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia pushed for a new accord between the Afghan parties. Rabbani was to remain president, but Hekmatyar, who was to be prime minister, demanded Massoud resign as defence minister; the plan was thrust upon Rabbani when the Pakistanis invited him to make a stopover in Islamabad and, under pressure, he agreed. Massoud resigned in June, but those close to him never forgave Rabbani for falling into a Pakistani trap.

I went back to Afghanistan that summer, and found the southern part of the city in ruins, ‘rather like what Beirut used to be’, I wrote at the time.[8]

One evening, as I travelled through the city at 6:30 p.m. on my way to try to arrange an interview with Hekmatyar, the new prime minister, my taxi was flagged down by two teenage gunmen. As we screeched to a halt, a wounded mujahid supported by another man came hobbling at speed from the line of shattered buildings beside the road and made for the car. I had heard gunfire, but I had not paid much attention: there was nearly always shooting in Kabul those days.

With his arm round his friend’s shoulders, the eighteen-year-old fighter, hit in the leg, gasped in pain as he was bundled into the back of the taxi. The friend climbed in beside him, Kalashnikov slung round his neck, and shouted orders at the driver. We swerved off to the right. The battered old taxi roared a few hundred yards up the wide deserted street, only to be stopped at the next checkpoint. A young gunman peered through the window, more shouting followed, and he and the wounded man’s friend changed places. As they did so, somebody behind us fired in our direction. I heard the report of the weapon and the crack of the bullet even above the din of the racing engine – the accelerator had jammed. For an unpleasantly vulnerable 20–30 seconds, we were stalled in the middle of the empty road, the driver desperately trying to get the car into gear, as the possibility of being shot in the back went through my mind. Eventually, with a grinding crash, he succeeded, and we shot off like Nigel Mansell at the start of a Grand Prix. Then a bend in the road hid us from whomever had us in their sights, and we breathed more easily.

Dropping the wounded man at the ICRC hospital, we started for home; I had decided to put off my application to interview the prime minister until a more favourable occasion. But as we retraced our steps, we met other taxis and cars speeding from the area where we had picked up the wounded man. They told us there had been more shooting and advised us not to go that way. We seemed to be trapped. It was now 7 p.m. and I did not fancy the prospect of spending the night by the side of the road, or in the taxi. We tried to take stock. We were in a Shia area captured from Massoud's Jamiat forces by the fanatical Hisb-i-Wahdat. Massoud's men, as well as controlling most of the city, held the bare mountain that towers over the southern suburbs; the shooting seemed to be coming from there.

Eventually, after much conflicting advice from local bystanders, we set off again, keeping to back streets and working our way towards the main boulevard, called Darulaman, where the trouble had started. There were a couple of anxious moments as we hurtled at speed over empty intersections in full view of the menacing mountain. Then we turned left in the lee of a high wall, and when I saw the back of the scorched and shell-pocked shape of the old Soviet Cultural Centre, I knew we were safe.

Like Beirut with its Green Line, Kabul was divided into party enclaves and no-go areas. Since Massoud had captured the city fourteen months earlier, fighting between his and Hekmatyar's forces had brought it to the edge of anarchy. There was no electricity because the prime minister's mujahideen had cut the power lines from Sarobi, a town east of the city they controlled, and no running water. Piles of rubble lined the streets, the country was broke, inflation was rampant, and the latest bout of government- inspired hysteria insisted that members of the minority Hazara tribe were poisoning fruit and vegetables in the bazaars by injecting them with a mysterious 'white powder'. The German club where I stayed for $40 a night, and where the old retainers still spoke passable German, resolutely refused to serve even green salad.

The United Nations and the West, preoccupied with Bosnia and Somalia, had abandoned the Afghans. Britain's Foreign Office, which refused to reopen Lord Curzon's famous embassy – said to be the finest British residence in the 'Orient' – was about to hand the building over to Pakistan, pleading poverty.

Against this background of isolation and abandonment, the principal players

seemed destined to fight another, even more savage battle at the expense of the one million inhabitants of a once-delightful city.

Hekmatyar, the prime minister, described by his rival Massoud as ‘a selfish dictator like Saddam Hussein’ and by others as another Pol Pot with his own version of Year Zero, was seen by most Afghans as a ruthless opportunist who wanted power at any cost. Still furious that he was not in command in Kabul, Hekmatyar had unleashed four more heavy rocket attacks on the capital since his first onslaught the previous August. The casualties had been horrendous. I reported:

> An ICRC official here estimates that since the fall of Kabul in April last year, about 100,000 people, mainly civilians, have been wounded … Many of the victims of Hekmatyar’s brutal realpolitik are children. One nine-year-old boy, Ashmatullah, who has been flown to Peshawar in neighbouring Pakistan, lost both legs in a rocket attack. Another little boy was even more grievously hurt: he lost both legs, and an arm as well. And both a mother and her six-year-old son, hit by the same rocket, lost both legs. No one seems to know how many have been killed, but between 20,000 and 30,000 is considered a realistic estimate. Thousands more have fled the capital or are homeless. Fourteen months ago, Massoud held virtually the entire city, but in recent months he has lost ground in the southern suburbs. He says this is due to ‘very powerful interference’ by Pakistan which supplied Hekmatyar with ‘money, ammunition, weapons, and advisers’. Iran, Massoud says, has also interfered repeatedly, notably by encouraging and financing Hisb-i-Wahdat, whose military commander, Abdul Ali Mazari, is said to be close to the Iranian spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. The Saudis, who tend to back every horse in the race, have also bankrolled Hekmatyar, whose rocket bills alone must have run into hundreds of millions of dollars. This massive support for Hekmatyar has given him control of the southern third of the capital, including the area round the Royal Palace of Darulaman and the huge, fortress-like Soviet Embassy, now gutted, with his unlikely Shia ally, the Hisb-i-Wahdat. Many of Wahdat’s fighters are terrifyingly young, boys of fifteen and sixteen, all armed with Kalashnikovs, and their insouciant savagery has appalled even the shell-shocked citizens of Kabul.
>
> Massoud and Hekmatyar have been on a collision course ever since they were young students in Kabul in the early seventies. Now the two men, both in their early forties, the radical Hekmatyar – black turban, black beard, black eyes, soft voice, and sinister smile – and the moderate Massoud – woollen *pukul*, hawk eyes, and sense of humour – seem to be on the brink of a battle royal.[9]

Hekmatyar was still unable to enter Kabul, and on a second attempt I drove 20 miles south, down the dusty, potholed road to the village of Charasyab, to find him. In a clump of trees surrounded by bare rolling hills, an old Soviet army camp served as his headquarters. We were forced to leave our taxi at a checkpoint and walk 300 yards in the heat and dust – to remind us of our

insignificance – to the compound, where he eventually received us, enthroned on an armchair at the far end of a simply furnished hut, wearing his trademark black turban.

I asked why, as prime minister, he was not in Kabul.

'But Charasyab is part of Kabul,' he said, with the first of many smiles. That was like pointing out that Chislehurst is technically part of London. Hekmatyar was more than economical with the truth – it hardly seemed to enter into his calculations at all. I asked him how he justified his repeated rocket attacks on Kabul and the deaths of so many civilians. He dismissed this as 'baseless propaganda', and said, 'We were attacked first.' He spoke softly, but he reminded me of a spider waiting at the centre of a web.

That summer, in June 1993, I went to see Massoud, who had just resigned as defence minister and removed himself to Jebal Seraj, 40 miles north of Kabul. In a long and frank talk at his base there – which was considered an important exclusive and published in full by the journal *Asian Affairs* – Massoud was much more forthcoming than his rival. He outlined his plans for the future.

'The politicians have failed us,' he said, referring to the nine-man Leaders' Council that had nominally been in power since April 1992. 'They have had a year to produce results and they have failed to do so.'[10] Massoud was now determined to bypass them with his own plan for an expanded Council of Commanders, consisting of sixty of Afghanistan's top military commanders, two from each province, to meet before the end of the month. Hekmatyar had accepted Massoud's plan at a conference in Jalalabad, near the Pakistani border, probably because the hook was baited with Massoud's offer to resign as defence minister.

Massoud explained to me that his actions in the face of Hekmatyar's attacks had focused on protecting his own forces and the population of Kabul. His intention had been, and still was, to bring Hekmatyar into the political scene, rather than defeating him militarily.

'We took up only defensive positions during this last year: we did not think about a decisive offensive against Hekmatyar,' he told me:

> Each time Hekmatyar was on the verge of defeat, in order to avoid further bloodshed and to stop the rocketing of Kabul and also to avoid tribal conflicts between Farsi and Pashtun, Tajik and Uzbek, we stopped our offensive and started negotiations in order to solve the problem …

From a military point of view, we wanted to limit the war, and stop it from spreading. We took defensive positions, with the idea of returning the country to peace and preparing the ground for elections …

The first thing was the Kabul population. We believed that if we could stop the fighting and the rocketing of Kabul even by a single day, it would be worthwhile. Secondly, we were worried about deepening tribal and national conflict in the provinces. Those things were very important so we were not keen to take decisive military action. We believed that because we were going towards elections, and it was a coalition government, we didn't think it was necessary to fight.[11]

But Massoud had concluded that all the efforts to form a coalition government and bring the parties together had failed, and his tactic of taking a defensive position to prevent the spread of war had also failed.

'Experience showed that it wasn't a wise policy,' he said. 'In the first place, Hekmatyar, personally, wanted to be in control of everything in Afghanistan, so that he could put into practice the special ideas which he has in his mind. He is a selfish dictator like Saddam Hussein. He wants everything for himself.'[12]

The larger problem was that Massoud's success in taking Kabul had surprised and upset all the neighbouring countries that had not been following the internal dynamics of Afghanistan, he said.

Our problem was that two countries backed two parties – Hisbi-Islami and Hisb-i-Wahdat. Each country has its own interest in Afghanistan. Pakistan backed Hekmatyar, Iran backed Wahdat. It is obvious and clear. Pakistan didn't expect that one day the [Najibullah] regime would be defeated by us. The Iranians also didn't expect that the regime would be defeated. They thought Najib would last and they had established very good relations with his regime.[13]

On one of Najibullah's last trips to Moscow, his plane had stopped in Iran for talks, Massoud said:

Pakistan wanted the regime to be defeated by Hekmatyar; the Iranians wanted the regime to continue, not to be defeated, so they could play their role. When the regime was defeated by us, it was against the interests of both countries …

As for the Western countries, they were in favour of a political solution through the United Nations. They also thought that if things went as they wished, certain people whom they favoured would be in charge of the government in Afghanistan. The United States was the leader among Western countries, and you know that there was a twin-track policy: the CIA, through ISI, was supporting Hekmatyar, and the State Department was working towards a UN peace programme. I'm sure they didn't know about our programmes and they didn't know much about the situation. So it came as a surprise to them as well that the regime would be defeated by us. They thought that by cutting arms to both sides a settlement would be reached along the lines of the UN peace plan. We

had some friends in the West and we explained the whole thing to them. We told them that those will be the stages and we will work towards those stages … But after the Soviet withdrawal they also lost interest in Afghanistan; and because our programme went slowly, they thought it might not take place, although they knew from past experience that we did whatever we promised to do, even if it was later rather than sooner.[14]

Massoud described how he had been in touch with the United Nations envoy to Afghanistan, Benon Sevan, who was working on a peace plan, and told Sevan that he should confer with commanders inside Afghanistan as well as the leaders sitting in Peshawar. Massoud told him he would advance as far as the gates of Kabul and halt for talks. Sevan agreed to meet him, but fighting erupted and he never came.

'When he was prepared to meet me, the fighting had started. This shows the influence of foreign countries on internal fronts,' Massoud said:

So, when the regime was defeated and we were pushed into the fighting, what happened? Pakistan interfered very powerfully, giving [Hekmatyar] money, ammunition, and weapons, sending advisers to commanders, to the leaders, and provoking [certain] commanders. Iran interfered, the Russians interfered through Uzbekistan. The Russians were worried about the spread of Islamic ideas in Central Asia …

If it hadn't been for the continuation of foreign aid to those factions even the limited fighting strategy would have worked, and maybe peace would have come to Afghanistan sooner, and the ground would have been prepared for elections.[15]

Massoud spoke at length about how he wanted the people to decide on the form of government and the leaders they would have. He emphasised strongly, several times, that he wanted to proceed towards elections. He proposed a government that would be two-thirds filled by professionals and technocrats and only one-third filled by members from the parties. And he said he fully supported a disarmament plan, and would take part in it if the other factions did.

About our new strategy from March [1993]. Our main aim is to establish a framework based on principles which give every nationality, every tribe in Afghanistan its own rights, so there would be no further tribal conflicts… a framework which could be made to lead to democracy, a parliamentary system. Since we had our role in defeating the old regime, we want to play a major role in establishing such a system. We feel it as a moral and Islamic responsibility, like a burden on our shoulders… The question of whether the people will elect us will not worry us. What is more important for us is to establish such a principle or such a base for the future. We are ready and prepared to remove every obstacle and everybody who works as an obstacle to the achievement of this goal. We would be very pleased if we could achieve this goal without any fighting. But if, in the

extreme case, we have to fight, then we are ready to fight. In [all] this we do not want any advantage for ourselves. We believe this is the best way of solving our problems. How to achieve our strategy?

Naturally we need an interim government … We would have much preferred a person like [Pir Sayed] Gailani or someone else who is not from the so-called fundamentalist parties, instead of Hekmatyar, as Prime Minister; and Professor Rabbani as President, so that there is a balance among the different parties. This interim government should prepare the ground for elections. In this interim period all the parties should participate. Our proposal was that in such a government two-thirds of the seats should be given to professional, non-party people – there are some very good people, technocrats, from the previous regimes in the West, in Pakistan and some in Afghanistan – and the remaining one third to the parties. This sort of regime should have made the preparations for future elections under the direct monitoring of the United Nations and the Islamic Conference [IOC] [*sic*]. This was our aim in the past and it is still our aim. But in the past, as I explained, selfish people inside Afghanistan and also foreign interference prevented us from achieving it. From the military point of view, our attempt to limit the fighting didn't succeed. Politically too, working with the leaders was not a good way to achieve this goal. The strategy of limited fighting led to a concentration of fighting in Kabul. Now we want to break [with] this war. To achieve this goal, we have to make contacts with the commanders and they should play their role. The thing that was agreed in Jalalabad was that the Defence Minister and the Interior Minister should be elected by the commanders. That was our proposal. We volunteered this and we didn't think about our post [Defence Minister] in volunteering that those two ministers should be selected by the commanders. This *Shura* of Commanders not only plays a role in selecting a Defence Minister and Interior Minister, but should also participate in preparing the ground for our main aim, which is the participation of the people in decision-making. Also, if we have to fight, this fighting should not be limited to Kabul. The clearing up of the areas [provinces] and organising the areas should be an overall action. The agreement made in Jalalabad was accepted by us. In order to avoid more fighting, we accepted Hekmatyar despite all his criminal activities. Despite the fact that we were not willing to see Hekmatyar as a Prime Minister – we would very much have preferred someone else, as I mentioned – we had to accept it to avoid fighting. Since an election is one of the things we insist on, we want to make the [run-up] period as short as possible. We are [very] interested in the surrender of weapons in Kabul, and outside Kabul, to the Defence Ministry Commission. Although we didn't want to accept Hekmatyar [as Prime Minister], to avoid further bloodshed and fighting we now accept him for the interim period until we go towards elections. A general election is our strategic aim, and we want to see it [take place] sooner or later. In this election, the United Nations and the IOC [*sic*] should play their monitoring role, so the people will not claim something is wrong. The Council of Commanders should be held responsible as soon as possible … The disarming of Kabul, the surrendering of heavy weapons to the Commission is also our desire and we want to do it before anybody else. We are not trying to weaken the interim government or disturb its activities, but we want to see it working well so that it will prepare the ground for future elections […] If Hekmatyar wants to start his work in the Prime Minister's Palace or Residence we will facilitate his work. We are ready to guarantee his security in Kabul, he should have no concerns about it.[16]

I asked, 'Does that mean you will keep your troops in place in Kabul?'

> If we see that he is ready to put into practice what has been agreed upon, namely the removal of heavy weapons and their surrender by all [groups] to the Commission, and the removal of military positions, we guarantee to do the same. We are most keen to do it. […] If Hekmatyar or *Wahdat* do not want to do it, or want to place obstacles in front of everything, we are ready to take any political actions to achieve our hope.[17]

I asked if military action would be used as a last resort.

> If as a last resort, we have to take military action, this decision should be made by the *Shura* of Commanders …
>
> We would like to see an Islamic Government in Afghanistan – a moderate Islamic Government. An Islamic Government which the people want. It is to the benefit of Afghanistan and to the benefit of the area and neighbouring countries. I repeat the point and emphasise: a moderate Islamic government.
>
> If you want to stop extremism in any direction you cannot stop it by force. The more force you use, the more extreme it will become. The best way is to work through a legally based moderate government which represents the people. With puppet regimes from outside you cannot stop a movement. Even if you spend a lot of money you cannot stop those extreme elements, or it will be only temporary, as in Algeria. Even if you spent millions of dollars in Algeria, you might not succeed. As the days pass, the situation gets worse and worse. The second thing which I want to emphasise is that we are willing to establish good relations with all our neighbours, and with the whole world. We are not in favour of conflicts, neither with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, nor with Iran and Pakistan, nor anyone else. We would like to establish good relations with all countries and start the reconstruction of our own country.[18]

Massoud's earnest desire for elections never came to fruition until after his own death. And his reluctance to deliver a coup de grâce to Hekmatyar allowed the man to wreak even more destruction.

Over four years from 1992, I visited Kabul frequently and almost always managed to interview Massoud. His time was consumed with managing Hekmatyar's aggression. Hisb-i-Islami forces controlled the Sarobi power station, 40 miles east of Kabul, and had been able to deprive Kabul of power and running water for most of the time the mujahideen had been in charge of the capital. He had threatened to blow up the dam if attacked, which made Massoud reluctant to eject his forces. Massoud had discovered from captured documents that Hekmatyar was set on demanding not only the prime ministership, which was already his in theory, but also control of the Interior Ministry and the authority to appoint the army's Chief of Staff.[19]

Hekmatyar's intention – and Massoud thought this 'very important' – was to show the world that the situation was unstable, and so to discourage foreign aid and the development of diplomatic relations, which were beginning to form. This, I came to realise, was always Pakistan's aim. Later, we saw the same tactics from the Taliban: a relentless policy against reconstruction projects, humanitarian organisations, schools, elections, and thousands of government workers and servicemen and women, driven by a desire to scare Western support away so that Afghanistan would fall into Pakistan's clutches.

I visited Massoud in Jebal Seraj again in November 1993, and later wrote up the interview for *Jane's Defence Weekly*: 'Headphones clamped to his head as the radio operator tuned the old Russian set, he called up his commanders in the Tagab Valley.' It seemed just like the old days, except that now Massoud was calling in airstrikes. MiG-21s were taking off from Bagram Air Base and bombing Hisb-i-Islami forces at Massoud's command.

Yet in his long battle with Hekmatyar, Massoud followed a policy that was gradualist, combining military and political pressure. 'From the beginning, our goal was not to destroy Hekmatyar completely,' he told me in November 1993. 'The main thing we were looking for was that Hekmatyar should accept the logic of the situation. But with the arms he has at his disposal, he wanted something from us which we were not able to give.'

His campaign, he said, was 'more a process of attrition. I think this would be the best way. Even if it takes more time, it is more fundamental, more basic.' And he was already suggesting in 1993 that Hekmatyar was no longer capable of overthrowing the government: 'Time is running out for Hekmatyar. The time when he had the chance to defeat the government is past. As the days go by, this process is accelerating.'

In the long-running battle between the two rivals, Massoud managed to keep control of the capital, fighting on two fronts with about 20,000 men, yet he never managed to break Hekmatyar's stranglehold on the city. Then, at the beginning of 1994, Massoud's former comrade-in-arms, Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek leader who helped him capture Kabul in 1992, turned against him. It was an astonishing volte-face, and one that was to cause tens of thousands of civilian deaths and casualties in Kabul and destroy half the city. Why did Dostum, who defected from the communist government of Najibullah to join Massoud,

subsequently change sides again? Was it because he was angered by Rabbani's alleged refusal to give him a government post? Did the Pakistanis bribe him?

Whatever the reason, Dostum formed an alliance with Hekmatyar and the Iranian-backed Hisb-i-Wahdat, and in January 1994, taking everyone by surprise, launched an attack on Massoud in what came to be known as the Civil War. It certainly took this observer by surprise. When a British friend and I had dinner with Dostum at his Qala-i-Janghi fortress in Shiberghan in the summer of 1992, I asked him when he and Massoud were going to 'deal with' Hekmatyar. He replied, 'I'm just waiting for Massoud to give the word.'

Now, Massoud's only ally was the pro-Arab, ultra-Sunni Pashtun warlord, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, whose Ittihad-i-Islami fighters were accused of committing atrocities against the Hazara population of West Kabul. The fighting in West Kabul had been going on since 1992, as the Shia mujahideen of Hisb-i-Wahdat, backed strongly by Iran, had sought to expand the territory under their control. They came up first against the fighters of Sayyaf, who came from Paghman, a rural area west of Kabul, and who controlled western parts of the city. The two groups were responsible for some of the worst atrocities Kabul suffered: detentions, torture, and a complete disregard for civilian life. But Hisb-i-Wahdat, which was nominally an ally of the government, also began to encroach on areas inhabited by Persian-speaking Tajiks, and Massoud came to see that the Shia group, and therefore Iran, was exploiting the weakness of the government to try to seize more territory and more power for itself. As Pakistan was pushing for power for its favourite, Hekmatyar, so was Iran pushing for its favourite, the leader of Hisb-i-Wahdat, Abdul Ali Mazari. His supporters were Shia, drawn from the Hazara ethnic group that inhabits Afghanistan's central highlands. In February 1993, Massoud began an operation to push Mazari's forces back.

'Wahdat asked for more than they deserved,' he told me later that year. 'They want extra advantages. They have some forces in Kabul, and they wanted to use their military ability to gain greater advantage from the situation in Kabul.'

The fighting was intense and, as overall commander of government forces in Kabul, Massoud received a share of the blame for what became known as the Afshar Massacre, especially from the organisation Human Rights Watch, which reported that 70–80 Hazara civilians were killed that day and several hundred men and boys seized. The mud stuck, and, years later, Richard Armitage, deputy

to the United States secretary of state, Colin Powell, told the BBC in a ‘doorstep’ interview that, because of atrocities committed by troops under his command, Massoud was an unacceptable ally. However, John Jennings, who was then the Associated Press correspondent in Kabul and was on the ground that day and the next, has questioned the accuracy of the Human Rights Watch accusations and rejected their conclusions. In a long interview, Jennings told me that Massoud did not personally conduct the operation, since he was at his base in Jebal Seraj – but that he ordered it.

‘I would say that the offensive that Massoud ordered into West Kabul was not … to bring the Shia population there under government control,’ Jennings said. ‘The offensive was aimed at driving Hisb-i-Wahdat Shia fighters out of areas that they had seized, that were not Shia areas and had never been Shia areas.’[20] He also said he doubted the reports that an estimated 70 or 80 killed during the attack were non-combatants, since he had watched the fighting and walked through the battle area the following day with Terence White, correspondent for Agence France-Presse and had seen only bodies of men of fighting age.

> We went through the Police Academy Polytechnic and found the office where we had, not very long before that, interviewed General Khudaidad. The general was gone, obviously; there was a dead Hazara young man in the next room with a drip still in. And if you went out and walked around the neighbourhood, you found dotting the landscape, not everywhere but every block or two, you would find one, two, three dead Hazaras. They were usually out in the open as if they had been shot down in flight.[21]

Of the reports of a massacre, Jennings said:

> I surmise that that assertion possibly comes from Human Rights Watch. I don’t have any confidence at all in Human Rights Watch or anything they publish. … The big question in my mind is how many of the people in that area were non-combatants; it was a front-line area – I question whether there were 70 or 80 civilians, non-combatants, in Afshar. The other thing is how they were killed: were they [victims of] collateral damage and artillery attacks? Were they brutally murdered by Massoud’s troops? I think not. Were they brutally murdered by camp followers of Sayyaf’s fighters? Possibly. But all of this stems from purported eye witnesses who overwhelmingly were affiliated with or sympathetic to Hisb-i-Wahdat. Again, as I said, I found lots of bodies of young men of military age lying around in that area and in the surrounding neigh-bourhoods. I did not see any women, small children, or children’s bodies lying around anywhere.[22]

Jennings also disputed an allegation that hundreds of men and boys had been

captured and disappeared during the operation.

> It was very unusual in those days for any single action to result in a three-figure death toll or captive toll.[23]

Drawing on his experience from covering so much of the fighting in those years, he outlined the most likely scenario.

> My assumption is [that] when Massoud's troops pushed through that area and went on down towards the south and east, pursuing Hisb-i-Wahdat fighters and trying to establish a front line to keep them from making a counter-attack and pushing back into that area, I expect that there [was] nothing keeping the people from Paghman [Sayyaf's base, in western Kabul] from sweeping into that area. And if there was any significant [number] of people left in the area after the offensive who didn't run away, which again I think is questionable, it is quite possible that Sayyaf 's people, I shouldn't even say 'Sayyaf 's people' because I think that at that time Sayyaf was doing everything he could to cooperate with Massoud – but people from Paghman who fervently or nominally may have regarded Sayyaf as their leader were probably doing some score-settling. Again, they had lost a lot of people, the Hazaras had taken a lot of their people captive over the preceding year, most of the people were never accounted for, presumed to have died in captivity under pretty horrific conditions.
>
> It seems plausible to me that something of the same nature may have happened to the Hazara captives that fell into the Paghmanis' hands. I cannot speak to the number. 700–750 seems high to me, because what you would expect in a situation like that is for people to be running as fast as their feet would carry them in the other direction, for there to not be that many people left to simply fall into enemy hands.[24]

I asked if the 'massacre' was 'sort of mutual'. He said, 'The very worst you can say is, if there was a massacre it was a retaliation for a year's worth of somewhat more widespread, systematic atrocities carried out by Hisb-i-Wahdat.'[25]

There is no doubt there were particularly terrible killings in the fighting in western Kabul. Kathy Gannon of the Associated Press reported seeing the remains of five women killed and scalped in a particularly grisly incident. Abdul Waheed Wafa, an Afghan employee of the Halo Trust mine clearance charity working in the area, told me they found a body in the outside well of practically every house they inspected, and in some cases more than one.[26] Massoud himself deplored the killings when questioned about them by the French writer and film-maker Christophe de Ponfilly several years later. 'Sayyaf's men were out of control. I deplore what happened in Kabul. I sent men to intervene.'[27] Massoud had sent Masood Khalili, his trusted friend and diplomatic envoy, with

Sayed Mustafa Kazemi, a prominent Shia mujahideen leader allied to Massoud, to mediate a truce. Khalili said later that they narrowly averted an ethnic war. ‘There were faults on both sides,’ he said.

Returning to the allegations against Massoud, Jennings said, ‘Armitage along with everyone else in US foreign policy is just wrong – [he] didn’t know what he was talking about simply because what he was saying was produced by sources that probably had a political agenda to begin with, but even if they didn’t, a decade or more after the fact and relying heavily on biased accounts is just not credible, and to focus on Massoud’s human rights record and ignore Mazari’s, that’s really… You can never underestimate the American official capacity to get things like that wrong.’[28]

17

Tea and Rockets with the Taliban

I was sipping tea on the verandah of my guest house one day in 1996, when the first rocket landed with a loud bang 200 or 300 yards away: ‘I knew then that I was well and truly back in Kabul,’ I wrote at the time. ‘Two more rockets followed, a thin cloud of smoke rising through the trees on the far side of Wazir Akbar Khan, where President Rabbani had a well-sandbagged house. No doubt that was part of the attraction for the Taliban gunners who had been unsuccessfully besieging Kabul for more than a year.’[1] So I reported in *The Times* that year.

The Taliban were then a group of religiously educated mujahideen – *talib* means ‘religious student’ – who emerged in 1994 as a Robin Hood movement in the southern province of Kandahar. Led by Mullah Omar, the Taliban subdued Kandahar’s warlords and their militias in the name of sharia (Islamic) law and took control of Kandahar almost without firing a shot. Neighbouring provinces soon fell almost as swiftly and bloodlessly. The Taliban, however, showed that they could be ruthless. Their message was simple: lay down your arms and obey our orders or suffer the consequences. They imposed the restrictive customs of Pashtun village life, banning television, music, dancing, and almost every other pastime, from kite-flying to cinema-going.

Just prior to Kabul, I had visited Kandahar, the Taliban capital, at the suggestion of a former ISI colonel, code name Faisan. He had been in charge of the four-man escort sent by President Zia of Pakistan to look after the safety of my crew and myself when we made a television documentary for ITV in 1994 about a group of Pashtun mujahideen ambushing a Russian convoy during the

Soviet–Afghan War. When he retired a few years later, Faisan offered to work for me privately and suggested a visit to the Taliban capital. Despite Faisan doing his best to make the city interesting, I found Kandahar – which had once been a magnificent city with moated walls and eight huge gates – unimpressive and dull. Faisan was intelligent and spoke good English, and Zia had told me that he was one of his best Special Forces officers. Faisan was also persuasive and tried very hard to impress on me the virtues of the Taliban, still a relatively recent phenomenon in Afghanistan. They meant well and would do great things for Afghanistan, he forecast. As the highlight of our week's visit, he arranged a meeting with the governor of Kandahar, Mullah Hassan, a close associate of Mullah Omar. What became very clear from the start, however, was that he had very little time for Westerners and, above all, Western journalists. After the introductory formalities, as I prepared to ask him some questions, he heaved himself out of his chair – he had lost a foot in the war – and announced, 'Time for prayer,' before stomping out.

Most of my time in Kandahar seemed to be spent sitting on the floor of the extremely shabby and uncomfortable guest house in which we were lodged. For the first few days, apart from the governor, we met virtually nobody. When we drove through the city on some minor errand, very little seemed to be happening. I don't remember ever seeing a crowd. Everything was quiet, but it was the calm of the grave, I felt, whereas Kabul, by comparison, and for all its problems, was vibrantly alive.

Towards the end of our stay, it turned out that Faisan had two friends working in Kandahar, who had plans for a trip, on which we were also invited. The friends were water engineers working on what had been the Helmand River Project, built by the Americans in the sixties along the lines of the Tennessee Valley Authority, but now fallen into disrepair. They planned to visit Sangin, the opium capital of Helmand, and it was decided that the four of us would drive there together. We would stay with the local police chief, camping out in his large garden. It became clear when we arrived that the chief had reservations about a British journalist being a guest, although, after some persuasion, he agreed to my presence. I am glad he did, because he turned out to be a most rewarding host.

On our way to Sangin, we stopped to visit an old friend of Faisan's, Mullah

Naqibullah, a once-powerful mujahideen commander and the leader of the Alikozai tribe. The Alikozai had controlled the Arghandab Valley, which in turn controlled the approaches to Kandahar. When the Taliban arrived in Kandahar in 1994, they told Naqibullah to lay down his arms, and after consulting President Rabbani he agreed to do so – Rabbani apparently thought the Taliban might prove a useful ally against Hekmatyar. It was also said that a great deal of money changed hands, but it seems that Naqibullah was tricked by the Taliban and sidelined by being 'rusticated' to his brother's farm outside Kandahar. Naqibullah said he had been left with only a dozen rifles for his own personal protection and nothing else. Not speaking Pashtu, I was unable to follow the conversation between Naqibullah, Faisan, and their friends.

However, at the end of our visit, Naqibullah, to my surprise, turned to me and said in English, 'When you next see Commander Massoud, please give him my best wishes.' As we drove away, I told Faisan with some surprise what Naqibullah had said.

'Oh yes,' he replied, 'he is a good friend of Massoud's. He is also a member of Jamiat, of which Massoud was the military commander.' That will have been one reason the Taliban did not trust him. Much later, after 2001, Naqibullah supported the United States-backed government of Hamid Karzai, and the Taliban planted a roadside bomb which blew up Naqibullah's car and left him with serious injuries, from which he eventually died.

We arrived in Sangin in the late afternoon and went to the police station, which had a large garden, in which we were to camp. Faisan and his friends sat up most of the night talking to the police chief, who next morning offered to show me around the town.

'Can I take my camera?' I asked.

'Yes, of course,' he said immediately.

After breakfast, armed with an old British Lee–Enfield .303 rifle, the police chief loaded us all into his Toyota pickup and drove us into Sangin. Almost everyone we passed seemed to be making for the centre of town with pots and pans and buckets – and even a tin bath, which one man was carrying on his head – all filled with strong-smelling dark brown paste known as 'brown sugar', or raw opium. When converted into heroin, it is one of the world's most expensive and lethal drugs. Its international sale was funding the Taliban insurgency, and

was the main source of revenue for the movement while it was killing and maiming thousands of young American, British, and other soldiers in the NATO-led coalition, and countless Afghans. Heroin is a scourge of biblical proportions, and no one seems to be able to control it. After dropping off Faisan and his friends, the police chief and I drove to the bazaar. Dozens of shops seemed to be doing a roaring trade, their fronts open to the street, their owners lolling in their chairs with their brown sugar in open white sacks stacked behind them.

I asked the police chief if I could take a photograph.

'Yes, yes, go ahead,' he said obligingly, although the merchants were not so obliging. Some of them turned away from the camera; others remonstrated angrily with the police chief. I didn't need to be told that they didn't like their pictures being taken. The police chief, however, simply ignored their objections and continued the tour, his rifle in hand and a smile on his face, as if he were determined to show me everything. Buying and selling opium was obviously perfectly legal, and so, I concluded, was taking photographs in places like the bazaar.

But when we finally caught up with the others, I found Faisan in a state of considerable agitation. He, who had been so cool under Russian fire during the would-be ambush that we tried to film back in the Soviet– Afghan War, met me with something close to panic in his manner.

'Where have you been?' he asked abruptly. I said I had just been round the bazaar and had taken a few photographs, no doubt sounding irritatingly offhand. Faisan was beside himself. 'We've got to get out of here immediately,' he said. 'These people are extremely hostile. They are complaining that we brought these people here,' meaning me, 'to destroy their living. They even started to rock the car. We must leave at once.'

After a hasty goodbye to the police chief, who seemed oblivious to Faisan's nervousness, I got into the car, and the tight-lipped driver edged his way through the crowd, which seemed to be increasing in size by the minute. Once we were clear, he put his foot down, and Faisan kept looking behind us to see if we were being followed. 'I don't trust those people,' he said.

Half an hour later, he had recovered his usual unflappable demeanour. Turning in his seat, he pointed out of the window. 'This is Maiwand,' he said, 'where, as you know, the British suffered one of their greatest defeats in Afghanistan.' His

voice betrayed a certain relish, I thought, as the green fields of the old battlefield rolled past our windows. It was here that Malalai, the Afghan Joan of Arc, waved her veil as a standard and, as legend has it, shrieked her *landay*.[2] Faisan recited, 'Young love, if you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand, / By God, someone is saving you as a token of shame.' He gave a little smile, as if to say he was happy not to have to report another defeat, this time at Sangin.

In the late 2010s, Sangin acquired the reputation among British troops of being the most dangerous town in Afghanistan. From the moment 3 PARA (the British army's 3rd Battalion, Parachute Regiment) arrived in Sangin, its soldiers found themselves fighting for their lives to hold the district centre against successive waves of Taliban fighters determined to drive them out. In those four years, the British lost more than 100 men in Sangin, with many more wounded. But the Taliban never took the district centre.

At first, Massoud and Rabbani had welcomed the rise of the Taliban, approving of their promise to introduce law and order and rid the country of lawless banditry. Massoud and Rabbani even supplied support to the Taliban in the early days, and some Jamiat commanders had joined the movement. But Massoud changed his mind after a personal encounter with the Taliban.

In February 1995, with minimal protection, Massoud drove down to Maidanshahr, south-west of Kabul, to meet some of the Taliban leaders.[3] The meeting came out of the Rabbani government's early favourable contacts with the Taliban and was arranged by several Pashtun religious elders whose party, Harakat-i-Inqilab-i-Islami, was a prominent force in the Taliban. The elders also offered to mediate. Massoud agreed and asked Shamsurahman, a northern Pashtun Jamiat commander who was the military logistics chief for the Shura-i-Nazar, to join the delegation.[4] The elders travelled to Maidanshahr to meet the Taliban and found most of the top leaders there: the deputy head of the movement, Mullah Rabbani, and the prominent military commanders Mullah Borjan, Mullah Khairkhwah, Mullah Ghous, and Abdul Wahid Baghrani – everyone but the supreme leader, Mullah Omar.[5] Massoud's envoys told them that Massoud wanted peace, to avert further fighting. Mullah Rabbani demanded to meet Massoud in person. When the delegation briefed Massoud the next day, one of his commanders, Registani, advised him not to go to an area under Taliban control, but Massoud was still keen, and replied that for the sake of

peace he would ‘even go to Kandahar’.

The next morning, Massoud sent his senior officer, Ahmad Muslem Hayat, ahead with the elders to scope out the meeting place. Muslem found the Taliban uncooperative. On his return, Muslem met Massoud at the front line and warned him that it was a trap. He even evoked a historical precedent: the fate of the short-lived Tajik leader Habibullah Kalakani, better known as Bacha Saqao, ‘the Water Carrier’, who ruled Kabul for less than a year in 1929 and, as the story goes, was captured when invited to a meeting by his Pashtun opponents, and then executed.

‘I tried to convince [Massoud] not to go to this meeting,’ Muslem later wrote in a personal account of the meeting, ‘but my colleagues convinced him to go, as they claimed [the Taliban] were good people. He stayed quiet and did not tell us of his decision.’ Muslem recalled that Massoud then suggested they take a walk together.

> As everyone waited and sat on the road, Massoud and I walked to a distant spot, and I did not know what he was going to say to me. As we walked, he stuck close to me, so the people behind could not see what we did. He asked me if I was armed and asked for my pistol. I was surprised at this question and told him that I had a Makarov and it was loaded with eight bullets, and he asked for an extra magazine. I gave him the pistol and told him I didn’t have an extra magazine, and then he turned to walk back toward the others. At this point, I was upset and started to question his actions and told him not to go forward with this meeting, because of past events with King Habibullah, who was killed in a similar fashion. I told him, ‘This is your last chance, because they will capture you and execute you.’ I kept trying to convince him, but he told me that he had made his decision and he had to go. I got a severe headache … it felt like my head was going to explode. He told me to stay if I didn’t want to come.
>
> He jumped into his car and I followed him in the second car, and we went towards the meeting point. I completely believed that this was a suicidal mission and we would not leave alive.[6]

Snow was banked either side of the road, and hundreds of Taliban fighters armed with rocket launchers and heavy machine guns were posted along the road every 200 yards or so for two miles. ‘We were outnumbered,’ Muslem recalled.

They drove to a small post on a hill outside the town of Maidanshahr and Massoud sat down with the Taliban on the rooftop. His guards stopped 100 yards below the post. Only Shamsurahman was with him. The Taliban greeted Massoud with great respect, he recalled. It was Ramadan, the month when Muslims fast from dawn to dusk, and the evening prayer was already nearing

when Mullah Rabbani, the deputy leader of the Taliban, finally began. Shamsurahman described the meeting:

> He recalled the jihad and the sacrifices made by the people of Afghanistan to establish an Islamic system. He then criticised the mujahideen for failing to establish comprehensive security in Afghanistan. He also mentioned the Mujahideen government's failure to comply with Islamic law, and complained that women were not wearing the veil, and also complained about the presence of communists in the government.[7]

They stopped to pray the evening prayer behind Maulvi Zahir, one of the mediators. After the prayer, Massoud spoke. He concurred that Afghan people had fought jihad in order to establish an Islamic system of security throughout the country and the adherence of Islamic law. He said he adhered to its principles. He was placatory. 'We do not have issues with your demands,' he told them. 'We all agree and want to help each other.'[8] But on specifics he did not yield. Mullah Rabbani demanded that everyone comply with the Taliban's disarmament process, but Massoud refused, saying, 'We are the government, so we should work together to disarm the rest of Afghanistan's armed groups.' The Taliban also wanted to clear the government of former communists – such as General Baba Jan, a Soviet-trained officer and a key ally of Massoud – and ban women from the workplace, which Massoud deflected. It was cold, and the time for breaking the fast at sundown was approaching. Massoud suggested that the talks should continue, and that next time the Taliban should come to Kabul.

He asked the Taliban leader to visit President Rabbani in the presidential palace in Kabul and advocated that, once disarmament was complete, all parties could go forward to contest elections, so the public could choose their leaders fairly. The meeting ended cordially, but a current of hostility was swirling.

Massoud told his commanders afterwards that he did not think the Taliban were their own masters. Indeed, during the meeting, Mullah Rabbani was urged by some commanders to take Massoud captive that day, according to a former member of the Taliban who was present at the meeting. Mullah Rabbani refused, saying, 'We are not hypocrites, we are Muslims. It is not the work of a Muslim when you invite a Muslim and a mujahid brother and you deceive him. No way, I cannot do this!'[9] Mullah Rabbani sent an escort with Massoud to ensure that he returned to the government side safely.

Mullah Rabbani paid for his refusal. He was immediately recalled to Kandahar by the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, who demanded, ‘How much money were you promised by Massoud?’ Rabbani denied there had been any deal or exchange of money, but he was stripped of his vehicle, telephone, and other trappings of power, and told, ‘There is no space for you in the movement.’[10]

Massoud learned of the threat to him on his way home. His intelligence operators manning the radios called to say they had picked up two radio intercepts from the Taliban ordering his capture. Massoud was lucky to escape with his life, his son Ahmad later told me.

But Massoud was undeterred. Just days after the Maidanshahr meeting, the Taliban seized control of Hekmatyar’s old base at Charasyab, expanding their hold on the southern approaches to the city. Massoud sent Shamsurahman and one of the elders, Maulvi Zahir, to see the Taliban at Charasyab. Mullah Rabbani was not there. They saw Mullah Borjan; he was in a testy mood, but he agreed to go with two others – Mullah Ghous and Abdul Wahid Baghrani – to Kabul to continue discussions. Massoud hosted the three Taliban commanders for two days, and together they agreed to convene a large bilateral council of religious scholars, who would decide the way forward. Members of the Taliban made several more visits to Kabul and met with President Rabbani among others, according to Shamsurahman, but all efforts to negotiate ended a month later when the Taliban entered a deal with the Hisb-i-Wahdat leader, Mazari, and then abruptly executed him.

I also went with an interpreter to meet the Taliban that year, and I found them hostile. They told me Massoud was a bad Muslim. The interpreter and I extricated ourselves as soon as we could and drove back to Kabul. I began to see that the Taliban were both belligerent and dangerous. Soon after in September 1995, the Taliban took Herat from Ismail Khan, killing hundreds of Massoud’s troops, who had been flown there in a last-ditch attempt to stem the advance. By June 1996, the Taliban were tightening their siege of Kabul.

I wrote in an article for *The Times* after a visit that year:

> Kabul had plenty of problems, not only the rockets, which were killing and maiming people almost every day. Inflation was rampant: a meal for three in the best kebab house cost me 60,000 afghanis – $4 at the rate of exchange at the time – while a doctor or teacher made only 80,000 or 90,000

afghanis a month. Cases of deprivation were countless.[11]

Despite the problems created by the Taliban, I detected a new optimism and self-confidence in Rabbani, who was running the Kabul government – and Massoud's great strength, his tireless perseverance to find a way forward, was on display. At the time, I wrote:

> Rabbani may be President, but Ahmad Shah Massoud, although he holds no official post, is the real power behind the throne. If anyone can unite the Afghans – and it may be an impossible task – it is more likely to be Massoud than anyone else. He has a plan and the energy to pursue it. In the course of the next few days, two meetings, and a long talk, I watched Massoud trying to implement stage one of his plan: the formation of a coalition government, which would then draw up a constitution and hold elections.[12]

His former arch-enemy, Hekmatyar, was, once again, proposed as prime minister, with defence and finance responsibilities thrown in for good measure. I suggested that that may be a risky if not reckless gamble. Massoud did not see it like that: echoing Stalin's famous jibe about the Pope, he asked how many divisions Hekmatyar had. The answer by then was hardly any, while the political advantage to Massoud was considerable, I wrote:

> Not only has the former favourite of the Americans and the Pakistanis been persuaded to change sides, but by doing so he has split the old and dangerous alliance with the northern warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum.
>
> One evening, on a terrace facing the snow-capped peaks of the Hindu Kush, overlooking the Shomali Plain where Mr Massoud once fought the Russians, I saw him deep in conversation with a group of Kandahari commanders – opponents of [the] Taliban – and a prominent member of the moderate Gailani Party, Sayed Salman Gailani, who was the Afghan Foreign Minister for a short time in 1992. Mr Gailani told me afterwards that there were few real differences between their two parties and he was confident that they could be overcome.
>
> Mr Massoud, who works an 18-hour day, has been talking to most of the other parties as well. Only two, for the time being at least, are considered impossible bedfellows, the Taliban and General Dostum. But as Mr [Abdul Rahim] Ghafoorzai, his foreign affairs adviser and Deputy Foreign Minister, put it to me, 'Mestiri [the former United Nations special envoy] made the mistake of trying to get a consensus. We are trying to get a majority of the political parties together in a coalition.'
>
> A couple of days later, sitting in a garden fragrant with the scent of roses and honeysuckle, Mr Massoud described his plan to me in detail. In stage one, lasting six to 12 months, with President Rabbani still in office, the coalition would set up various commissions: one to draft a new constitution, a second to plan a national army, a third to deal with national security.
>
> A Loya Jirga (the traditional grand national assembly) would be called. In stage two, President

Rabbani would resign. Once a ceasefire has been declared, the Loya Jirga would ratify the constitution, implement the plans for national security and a national army and, very important, 'prepare the ground for elections'. Mr Massoud said: 'Our idea is not to hold on to power, but to allow the people to decide.'

Later, after dinner, Mr Massoud listened raptly while a friend recited Hafez, a Persian poet of the 14th century, joining in from time to time. But then the Afghans, as has been said, are fundamentally a nation of poets.[13]

Soon after Hekmatyar arrived in Kabul as prime minister, I went to see Massoud. His office was in a rather elegant former embassy building, near the United Nations guest house. His right-hand man, interpreter and foreign affairs adviser, Dr Abdullah, was with him. I began by saying how surprised I was – 'flabbergasted' would have been more accurate – that Rabbani had invited Hekmatyar to Kabul as prime minister, and I expected Massoud to express equal concern. Instead, to my surprise, he and Dr Abdullah looked at one another and smiled.

'He won't be able to do anything,' Massoud said.

I looked from Massoud to Dr Abdullah and back again, surprised. They exchanged glances, still smiling, and I think it was Dr Abdullah who said, 'He won't have any influence. He won't be able to do anything.' I was dumbfounded. Perhaps Massoud thought Hekmatyar was finished.

Not long after, however, things began to go wrong. Hekmatyar's presence was greeted by the Taliban's heaviest rocket and artillery attack to date. An estimated 300 rockets pounded the city, killing 64 and wounding another 138. The veteran Australian war correspondent Anthony Davis, who covered Afghanistan for many years and knew Massoud well, has said that, from then on, military strategy became inextricably caught up in the 'political compulsions' of the new government in Kabul – meaning the complications caused by Hekmatyar's presence – and proved disastrous. For example, whenever Hekmatyar's forces were in trouble at the hands of the Taliban, Massoud was forced to come to the rescue by despatching forces from 'Fortress Kabul', which he might otherwise have held indefinitely. 'We came out [from a defensive position around Kabul], we didn't pay attention to the defensive line,' Massoud later reflected.[14]

He went on to say, 'Every day Hekmatyar was worried [and saying]: "They're [the Taliban] working to a plan. They've taken Paktia, they've taken Paktika, and

you've done nothing, you're not cooperating, you're not fighting." Every day the talk was of this,' Massoud said, 'and every day Professor [Rabbani] was pressuring me, saying, "Well, maybe Hekmatyar's right."' Fatefully, Massoud thus fell between two stools: in the first eight months of 1996, he failed to break the Taliban outside Kabul, and then, against his better judgement, he allowed himself to be cajoled into over-extending himself defensively. Step by step, the ground was laid for the debacle of September and the fall of Kabul.

With hindsight, it can be argued, according to Davis, that one of Ahmad Shah Massoud's 'greatest mistakes as a general' was his 'failure to launch a major winter offensive in the first quarter of 1996 to break up Taliban main forces grouped around the capital'. Massoud was later to explain in an interview with Davis that he had every intention of carrying out such an offensive, but it was 'continually postponed owing to political developments and Hekmatyar's joining the government'. Even before the onset of winter, Massoud's Central Corps was arguably in better shape than at any time since the beginning of the post-1992 factional fighting. The force had increased to become 20,000–25,000 strong; resupply from both Russia and Iran in 1995 had provided reserves of ammunition; morale had recovered from the debacle in Herat, the Taliban's defeat of Massoud's ally Ismail Khan; and the effectiveness of his better trained Panjsheri units against Taliban forces around the city had been amply demonstrated in March 1995. His troops, moreover, were operating on interior lines from a secure base. The Taliban, by contrast, were exhausted by their failed offensives of October and November and were sitting out a bitter winter in a wide arc around southern Kabul with some 7,000–8,000 men. Many tribal elements had drifted away.

Yet Massoud, 'ever cautious', did not move in the winter, and then delayed long into the spring. The offensive did not finally materialise until 10 May, and it was 'relatively limited' in scope, although Taliban casualties were said to be heavy. However, it did nothing, Davis claims, 'to alter the overall strategic situation around the capital, in particular the capacity of the Taliban to rain rockets in from the south'.[15]

In the weeks before the Taliban took Kabul, I was in the habit of hitching a lift in Dr Abdullah's car up to Istalif, a pretty little town in the hills above the Shomali Plain famed for its pottery, where Massoud was using King Zahir

Shah's former guest house as a temporary headquarters; this got him away from the rocketing in the capital. Robin Raphel, who became the United States' assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs in August 1993, visited Afghanistan and had a long meeting with Massoud in Istalif. Masood Khalili also attended the meeting. Raphel reminded them that they had not been able to form the broad-based government that had long been planned, and told them that it would be hard to win the war against the Taliban. The message was, in effect, 'You have failed; let the Taliban take over.'

'She did not tell us to surrender,' Khalili said later, 'but the way she was saying that America [would] not support us in relation to the Taliban … we indeed got some sort of perception that America is not helping us, while America is trying to tell us indirectly, "Don't fight against the Taliban."'[16]

'Commander Massoud, I do recall, said he would fight to the last minute because people do not accept the Taliban at all,' Khalili added.

Raphel admitted Massoud was 'very engaging', although she considered him a 'warlord'.[17] 'It wasn't for us to choose between warlords who were tainted,' she said. 'Let them choose amongst themselves.' She felt that Massoud charmed his visitors by his openness to Westerners and, in effect, was saying, 'Choose us because we are smart, because we read books and can talk to you – not because we have the ability to be tolerant for the other 80 per cent of the population.' In her mind, Massoud was 'in it for himself, and for power for the Tajiks.'[18] When John Jennings thanked Raphel for interceding to free him from 'the bastard's clutches' (a reference to Hekmatyar, whose men had imprisoned him), she replied, 'They're all bastards.'[19]

Davis, who knew Massoud well, said Raphel's remarks proved 'how totally she misunderstood [Massoud], totally… ludicrously'.[20] Some time later, I invited Raphel to lunch in London. Towards the end of the meal, I asked her how much longer the United States was going to support 'that dreadful man, Hekmatyar'. She half rose from her chair, her face angry, as if about to walk out. She took her leave shortly afterwards.

18

Mortal Enemies

Fighting the Russians was never Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's primary agenda. He was much more interested in sabotaging other mujahideen parties, so that when the Russians left he would be the most powerful Afghan leader. He had long been accused of assassinating outstanding commanders from other parties, especially from Jamiat, Massoud's party. In the summer of 1988, Sayed Jamal, Hekmatyar's commander in Takhar Province in the north, arrested, tortured, and killed thirty of Massoud's best commanders – despite having promised them safe conduct – in what became known as the Farkhar Massacre. Massoud had Jamal arrested and brought before an Islamic court. He was found guilty, sentenced to death, and executed.

One of the earliest and most notorious murders laid at Hekmatyar's door was that of Professor Majrooh, a distinguished Afghan academic who had conducted an opinion poll for his newspaper to discover which Afghan leader was most popular with the tens of thousands of Afghans living in refugee camps around Peshawar in Pakistan.[1] The poll showed unequivocally that the ex-king, Zahir Shah, was by far the most popular. Soon after the results were published, someone knocked on Professor Majrooh's front door in Peshawar. When he opened the door, he was shot dead at point-blank range. The gunman – or gunmen; no one was ever arrested – was said to have acted on Hekmatyar's orders, although he denied it.

Hekmatyar had a large following in the Peshawar refugee camps but, in my experience, many Afghans hated him and thought him a murderous fanatic. Among the victims of Hekmatyar's alleged political assassinations were two of

my friends: Mirwais, a talented young Afghan journalist who freelanced for the BBC, and Andy Skrzypkowiak, the ex-SAS soldier-turned-cameraman of Polish descent with whom I worked on the one-hour documentary about Massoud (*Afghanistan: Agony of a Nation*) for ITV in 1986.

The killings of Mirwais and Skrzypkowiak shocked me deeply. Skrzypkowiak was killed a year after we made our documentary. He was killed by a Hisb-i-Islami gang that had orders from Hekmatyar to turn back any journalists and aid workers travelling through Nuristan on their way to see Massoud. Skrzypkowiak was alone except for a Panjsheri horseman, and was on a BBC assignment to film Massoud. The Hisb gang detained him in Kantiwar, the main town in Nuristan on the way to the Panjsher. He escaped, was pursued, and, after a struggle, was taken prisoner and later killed. A young member of the gang, an eyewitness to the killing, was so horrified that he went to the British, turned Queen's evidence, and swore an affidavit that Andy had been killed by having a large stone dropped on his head while he was asleep, smashing his skull. Andy's body, still in his sleeping bag, was carried across the small river beside which the gang had camped and was given a shallow burial on the other bank. It was discovered there by some Kuchis (a nomadic people), who gave it a decent burial.

Soon afterwards, members of the gang were arrested in the bazaar of the northern Pakistan frontier town Chitral, trying to sell Andy's expensive 16 mm Aaton camera, used mainly by documentary film-makers. They were also found to be carrying a large sum of dollars, stolen, it turned out, from a team of Dutch doctors commissioned by the French charity Médecins sans Frontières to work for a year in Afghanistan.

When he was made aware of the affidavit, the British high commissioner to Pakistan at the time, Nicholas Barrington, complained several times to Hekmatyar, who denied all knowledge of the killing. When the members of the gang were subsequently released without charge, I complained personally to President Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan, who sent me to see the then head of the ISI, Hamid Gul. Gul insisted the members of the gang had been released because they were innocent – a patent lie. Hekmatyar was said to have paid a very large bribe to get them out.

Some of Andy's old SAS comrades wanted to recover his body and bring it

back to Britain for a proper burial, but his family finally decided against it. I happened to know an Afghan guide who came from the same village in the Panjsher as the gang leader, Luqa, and asked him what had happened to the ringleaders. They had all been killed, he said, without saying by whom – I presumed some of Massoud's mujahideen who were friends and admirers of Andy.

Mirwais was killed on Hekmatyar's orders for contradicting his claim to a visiting Japanese journalist that his troops were in possession of a strategic hilltop overlooking Kabul. Hekmatyar's former chief of security, who was present, later gave Massoud an account of the meeting. He said that an argument followed, and Mirwais, who was accompanying the Japanese, stuck to his guns, saying he had been there on the day in question and had seen Hekmatyar's troops being driven off the hilltop.

As Mirwais and the Japanese journalist left to drive back to Kabul after the interview, Hekmatyar, in a fury, allegedly gave orders to his head of security to, in effect, have Mirwais killed. His body was found later by the Red Cross, dumped by the side of the road in the Kabul suburb of Chilsitoon. Jennings, who was asked by the Red Cross to identify the body, said that Mirwais had been savagely beaten before being shot, and he counted 'more than thirty bullet wounds' in his body. Massoud told me the story one day. When I asked him the source of his information, he said that Hekmatyar's security chief, who had defected to Jamiat, had told him.

I would say that the Americans, prompted by the ISI, made a disastrous mistake in backing Hekmatyar. After giving Hekmatyar many millions of dollars, the Americans finally saw the light – but very late in the day. However, there is another argument, advanced by Gerry Warner, which I quote for fairness, which goes like this: 'The CIA had no option but to support Hekmatyar. He and his allies were the strongest force, the only ones accessible; nor did they [the Americans] have any option but to work with the ISI. As Churchill did with Stalin.'[2]

I asked Warner if he thought that it would have made a big difference to Afghanistan if Massoud had survived. This was his answer: 'I think that the probability is that it would have done, because he was less bigoted, more intelligent, more open-minded, and I think above all more honest, less corrupt.'

19

Massoud Retreats from Kabul

Massoud once told me that it was a miracle that he survived the bitter fighting in Kabul in 1994, when his former allies turned against him. Nemesis, however, was hovering near, in the shape of the Taliban. After a year's siege, Kabul fell in 1996.[1]

What transformed the amateurish, undertrained Pashtun mujahideen I had seen trying to ambush a Soviet convoy and besiege a government fort at Hisarak in eastern Afghanistan in 1984 into a successful, if still relatively primitive, guerrilla army? Undoubtedly, the Taliban bandwagon had attracted some useful recruits, including Russian-trained former Afghan army officers. Their gunnery had suddenly improved, an officer in Massoud's army told me one day, as the Taliban forces laid down a salvo near where we were standing on the Kabul front line.

Most significant of all, however, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia decided to increase their support in dramatic fashion, the former by vastly expanding its military assistance programme, the latter by opening its already generous coffers. In 1996, just before the Taliban took Jalalabad and then Kabul, Prince Turki, the Saudi intelligence chief at the time, flew to Afghanistan and handed the Taliban several million dollars, according to Ahmed Rashid, a well-informed correspondent at the *Daily Telegraph*.

The flood of petrodollars not only helped to provide more guns and equipment – including new four-wheel-drive Toyota Land Cruisers, which the Taliban used for their own version of blitzkrieg – but, even more importantly, it provided the wherewithal to buy over neutral, and even opposition, commanders. Such horse-

trading was nothing new in Afghan history.

Massoud, increasingly isolated in Kabul, found himself at the wrong end of a takeover bid. Seeing his support melt away like the snows of the Hindu Kush in summer, he opted for a tactical withdrawal, and lived to fight another day.

The Taliban's final push to take Kabul from the east began with their capture of Jalalabad on 12 September 1996. From there, they pressed on rapidly in the direction of Sarobi, opening the road to Kabul. On Hekmatyar's insistence, Massoud sent a force of at least 2,000 men to shore up the defences of Jalalabad, according to Amrullah Saleh, a senior aide in the foreign ministry, whose cousin, Najim, was assigned to lead the force: 'We literally sent a convoy of 2,000 troops into an area where Hekmatyar said "I have supporters", but it went like an expeditionary force, without any support right or left or front,' Saleh said. 'They entered Jalalabad from the west, and the Taliban entered from the south.

'As they entered Jalalabad, the population welcomed the Taliban, and they came into confrontation with our troops. So, [our troops] decided to come back to Kabul, but they couldn't, because the road was now under Taliban control. So, they crossed the Besoud bridge and went to Laghman, crossed the Laghman bridge, and fought their way back to Kabul. When they entered Kabul [as] a defeated convoy entering the city, it further demoralised what we had.'[2]

When Jalalabad fell, Massoud sent one of his senior commanders, Muslem, who headed a reserve brigade of fighters, to defend the town of Sarobi, which guarded the approaches to Kabul. 'We defended Sarobi for one or two days,' Muslem recalled.[3]

On the night of 24 September, the Taliban made a three-pronged attack, throwing their troops across minefields in fast Toyota pickups. Mullah Borjan, the Taliban's top commander, who was leading the offensive, was killed in the fierce fighting. Alongside the Taliban, Muslem said he recognised Pakistani troops on the battlefield.[4]

'It was very coordinated,' he said. 'A combined, coordinated attack, with artillery, tanks – infantry with tanks. Very heavy fighting, and they lost a lot, and we lost a lot. We lost our ammunition, we had no air power, no communications; it was really chaotic.'[5] Then the Taliban changed direction, cut through an alternative route over the Lataband Pass to the south of the main road, and reached Pul-i-Charki, a suburb in Kabul's south-east. Massoud ordered Muslem

to pull back to Kabul and set up defences around Kabul airport.

The next afternoon, their position was so precarious that, at an emergency meeting with his senior commanders, Massoud gave the order for a general withdrawal. Rather than allow his forces to be destroyed piecemeal in a futile battle for Kabul, he decided to make an overnight withdrawal to the Panjsher, taking with him not only his army but the bulk of his equipment as well. Such an operation – evacuating a large number of troops from a city at night while being pursued by an enemy – is notoriously risky, but in Massoud's hands it turned out to be remarkably successful. At 10 p.m. that night, Massoud called Muslem and ordered him to pull back from the airport to Khair Khana, the eastern gateway that leads to the Shomali and the Panjsher. Muslem recalled, 'When I went to Khair Khana, he said, "OK, come to Jebal Seraj." Step by step.'[6]

Amrullah Saleh recalled hearing Massoud directing operations over the radio:

> He was calm. From 9 in the morning until 6:30 p.m., I was listening to Massoud's on-and-off instructions. He was not panicked; he was calling on specific units to withdraw, to take which route and which equipment.
>
> Dr Abdullah flew in from Mashhad in Iran to Kabul. He arrived at 9:30 a.m. and I was in the hierarchy under him, so I drove to Bagram to receive him. On the way from Bagram back to Kabul, he contacted Massoud by radio. He left the car and joined Massoud in Taraba or somewhere. I came back to Kabul.
>
> At 6:30 p.m., I left my office and went to the airport. I climbed the control tower and I saw the eastern edge of the runway in flames – because those guys had reached close to the airport and they had fired on it, and so there was fire in some parts of the airport.
>
> I took my car and went to [the intersection that is now known as] Massoud Circle, and I looked to the east and I saw two tanks coming towards us. I thought these were our tanks coming. I wanted to stay a bit and say hello, so they may recognise me. But they fired at me, and I realised I was waiting for the wrong tanks, so I came to my office again, by which time it was around 7 p.m. Then I left my car and got into a friend's car and we drove to Panjsher, and I met Massoud in Jebal Seraj, in a room where he was sitting with Rabbani and Sayyaf. That's how I remember that specific day.[7]

Massoud only lost one commander, Kassim Darai, who was killed in Jalalabad. The rest of his forces retreated with much of their equipment, alongside tens of thousands of civilians and families.

'My guess is that about 100,000–150,000 people left the city that day,' Saleh said. 'I think the military was maybe below 20,000 or something. From all the front lines, the west, Charasyab area, Pul-i-Charki area, more than 100,000

civilians left.’

When he reached the Panjsher, Massoud gave orders to block the narrow entrance to the valley by blowing up the rock face at the Roitang Gorge with 50 tonnes of explosives. That night, Muslem crept out beyond the rock fall and laid mines along the road to deter the Taliban advance. The next morning, the Taliban hurled themselves into a fresh assault, but Massoud’s defences held. He had conducted an exemplary tactical withdrawal – it was a risky military operation, and an example of his military genius.

He told his men that it had not been worth defending Kabul and risking further civilian casualties in the name of a corrupt government. In the last hours, there had been intelligence reports that Hekmatyar was preparing a coup to seize power.

But Massoud was also clear-eyed enough to recognise his failings and those of his allies, and to analyse his mistakes. Dr Abdullah, who was a close aide for many years and who later became foreign minister after 2001, said Massoud understood that the mujahideen leaders, himself included, had lost popular support.

‘As far as the fall of Kabul was concerned, the general perception among the people was that, as long as we were in Kabul, the fighting would probably continue,’ he told me:[8]

> Because as long as people are in the midst of war … there are uncertainties, and you cannot communicate everything with them … That was why Commander Massoud said, ‘In the eyes of the people, we have lost the war.’
>
> Hundreds of rockets were raining down on Kabul. Kabul was under siege, there was a blockade of fuel, food, everything … There were times when people were bringing food on the back of their bicycles, that was how food was transported, and that was because of Hekmatyar, who at that time was blockading the city. The fighting was continuing, and when the fighting continues, people tend to blame both sides.
>
> Massoud couldn’t protect them from the rockets. He couldn’t remove the blockade. He couldn’t provide salaries for the civil servants. The soldiers were underpaid. There were lots of these things, and these were the challenges. And he was saying, ‘Look, if this is the case, then we can’t blame the people for being unhappy.’ It puts you in a weak position in terms of fighting, and also the government, the civilian part of the government, was not functioning. The military part was doing its bit. The legitimacy of the government was also questioned by the people at that time.[9]

Saleh, who was serving under Dr Abdullah in the foreign ministry, recalled that

the government led by Rabbani was in political disarray:

> It had already failed politically, and economically as well. It was comparable to or worse than any African case, which means the population of the city was asking a very basic question of Massoud – although there was no media, they were asking, 'What is keeping you fighting? You fight for what? We know who you fight against, but we don't know who you fight for.' I think this was a very fair question, because, behind the line, the political class had already failed; because there was no delivery of services, the court system was not working, they were unable to engender a grand vision for a solution in Afghanistan, they had run out of ideas. What was keeping Kabul as Kabul was the military prowess of Massoud, and it was running thin and being peeled off day by day.
>
> The military had run out of equipment; the transport of the military was literally in ruins. We were mainly using Russian trucks, and we didn't have spare parts. For ammunition, we had become completely dependent on occasional airlifts from Russia, from Belarus – we were buying the stuff. And there was piecemeal military assistance from Iran. Flights were coming into Bagram, and then we would distribute the supplies to the front.
>
> But for the civilian population there was nothing. Roads were blocked; the control of the government was limited. Inflation was running at 1,000 per cent. Literally, we were printing money to keep filling the pockets of the people. And the economy was basically two items: war and criminality.
>
> In the midst of this, there was one man who knew what was going on, and that was Massoud. He had two options: to completely exhaust himself in the street fight in Kabul, further damage his credibility and damage his reputation, further embolden the question as to what are you fighting for [or to pursue a calculated military strategy]. When you cannot defend a big area, instead of completely losing your men, you'd better retreat and recuperate, which is what he did, and also re-engender a grand new vision, which he did. So, he retreated.[10]

Massoud went to the one place where he was impregnable – the Panjsher Valley. The Russians had never got the better of Massoud in the Panjsher Valley, and neither would the Taliban.

20

A Low Ebb

Massoud still commanded 20,000 men but, by the spring of 1997, they found themselves at a very low ebb, short of money and ammunition, struggling to provide for their refugee families, and absorbing the shock of their defeat in Kabul and its surroundings.

Heavy fighting had raged through the winter of 1996 as the Taliban pressed their offensive, determined to pursue Massoud and finish him off. Massoud and the Uzbek militia leader, General Dostum, who commanded the remnants of the Afghan air force, had fought an allied defence, parrying multiple attacks. Just days after taking Kabul, in early October 1996, the Taliban had mounted a fierce three-day assault at the Roitang Gorge, attacking with helicopter gunships, jets, tanks, and artillery.[1] Massoud had held them off, commanding the defence from Anaba, the first village beyond the gorge. He had had the foresight to build a road up above the gorge and station troops in a lookout position above the cliffs. From the heights, Gul Haidar and a few hundred men poured withering fire down on the approaching Taliban, who took heavy casualties – by one account losing 150 men – and were forced to withdraw. The Taliban advance, which had surged up through the country virtually unchallenged over the last two years, had been halted. Massoud was making his stand, and indeed the Taliban never succeeded in taking the Panjsher Valley throughout their five years in power.

Nevertheless, over the winter months of 1996, the Taliban had steadily consolidated control over the surrounding area of the Shomali Plain, capturing the town of Gulbahar, just below the Panjsher, and most of the provinces of Parwan and Kapisa right up to the Salang pass. In the face of such overwhelming

momentum, and by frequent accounts encouraged by Saudi dollars,[2] many commanders had opted to join the movement, among them the influential mujahideen commanders Basir Salangi and Ayub Salangi, along with twenty-five of their subcommanders who controlled the Salang highway, the main artery to the north. They had contacted Massoud by radio, calling on him to come over too, Jamshid recalled. 'They are good people,' he quoted them saying. 'If you surrender your weapons, do not resist, they will not hurt you, bla-bla-bla.'[3] Massoud and his commanders did not trust the messages, but their forces were under pressure. Some were so short of supplies on the front lines that they were exchanging their ammunition for loaves of bread.

'April, May, June, July '97 were really, really difficult,' Saleh recalled.[4] The Taliban decided to bypass the Panjsher and marched north, racing to subdue the rest of the country. They besieged the Shia Hazara areas around Bamiyan in central Afghanistan (later committing widespread massacres in the area) and co-opted regional commanders where they could, in a tactic that helped them seize control of the northern city of Mazari-Sharif in May 1997. It was another devastating blow for those resisting the Taliban. General Dostum, betrayed by one of his commanders, Malik, fled to Tajikistan, and other Uzbek allies were killed or captured. Soon after, the towns of Kunduz and Taloqan came under pressure, forcing Rabbani and the mujahid leader Sayyaf also to flee to Tajikistan. With the Salang highway blocked and the northern cities taken, supply lines into the Panjsher were cut. 'Massoud was isolated, and his only access was by air,' Muslem recalled.[5]

On the day the Taliban seized Mazar-i-Sharif, 25 May 1997, Pakistan announced that it was establishing diplomatic relations with the Taliban, the movement that its own foreign minister had once compared to the French Revolution. Pakistan was followed in quick succession by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. No one else recognised the Taliban. In fact, the United Nations rebuffed the Taliban by refusing to let them occupy the old Afghan seat in the General Assembly. Within days, the northern militias turned against the Taliban in Mazar-i-Sharif, unleashing a terrible bloodletting and killing or capturing several thousand Taliban members in the city. It was a severe setback for the Taliban, and a lasting source of pain for many Pashtun families whose conscripted sons perished, but the situation for Massoud and his allies remained

precarious.

Massoud's followers described him during those months as the sole calm presence amid the panic.[6] He fielded calls from commanders across the north. Some were under imminent threat, outgunned and running out of ammunition; others reported casualties and asked what to do about Taliban overtures. Determined from the start to resist the Taliban, Massoud never stopped organising. He told his men they could leave if necessary and settle their families, many of whom were now homeless refugees. Yet he also told his men that they should resist the Taliban, in the same way they had fought the Russians, to thwart their ambitions. 'If we resist, one day they will not be able to rule Afghanistan. One day they will have to come to negotiations,' he told them.[7]

Yet he struggled with a lack of international support and money. His differences with Rabbani left him cut off from all financial resources for a period. In February 1997, he appealed for help from the British government, among others, and warned that Afghanistan was being turned into a base of drugs and terrorism under Taliban rule. The defeat of communism in Afghanistan should have heralded a new era for Afghanistan, he wrote in a handwritten appeal to the British defence secretary, Michael Portillo:

> Your Excellency,
> I believe that the defeat of the former Soviet Union and of communism is not only a product of the struggle of Afghanistan's people but is also due to the support and cooperation of the international community, and especially of our allies. Democracy became victorious at the end of the Cold War as a result of fourteen years of war against the Russians and the sacrifices of about 1.5 million of our brave and free-spirited people, with some internal factors in the former USSR. In addition, the USSR was freed and the republics under the yoke of the Soviets – especially the Muslim-majority republics of Central Asia and the republics of Eastern Europe – were able to free themselves and to acquire their independence.
>
> I was and I am certain that with the fall of communism the world has entered a new stage, and Afghanistan should have fulfilled its role in Central Asia, established democracy, formed a broad-based, centrist government, and initiated the reconstruction of the country. Additionally, Afghanistan in this new stage should have reintegrated into the international community as a peace-loving nation, should have prevented the spread of terrorism in the region, and should have stopped drug trafficking. Afghanistan, as a free and independent country, could have cooperated with the newly independent states of Central Asia to facilitate its economic growth.
>
> Yet, unfortunately, warmongers in Pakistan, especially in the ISI, and in some other countries, resorted to machinations and started helping the parties opposing our newly formed government. The overt and covert political and military intervention of these states, especially Pakistan, caused the

proxy war of the last four and a half years.

Until peace prevails in Afghanistan, until a strong central government is established, until democracy is embraced through free and fair elections, until a future government is formed on the basis of the people's will, and ultimately until foreign countries stop their intervention in my homeland, the war will continue, and, for years to come, Afghanistan will be used as a base for training terrorists and producing drugs by fanatical groups and organisations against humanity.[8]

The letter fell on deaf ears.

Dr Abdullah, a long-time aide and envoy who later became Afghanistan's foreign minister, has told a story that illustrates just how precarious the situation had become by May 1997. Among all the shortages, money ranked high on the list. Massoud's side was broke as well as beleaguered. Massoud sent an SOS for more funds – 300 million afghanis – to be printed in Moscow and flown to the Panjsher, where they were due to arrive at Massoud's headquarters on a particular day, aboard his last remaining serviceable helicopter.[9]

Massoud and Dr Abdullah assembled on a knoll outside the headquarters at the appointed time, gazing hopefully up the valley in the direction from which the helicopter should come. For long minutes the sky was empty, and then suddenly Massoud exclaimed and pointed. Straining their eyes, the men could just see a tiny speck in the great V of the valley. As they watched, the speck grew bigger, heading straight towards them. Finally, when they knew for sure it was the helicopter they were waiting for, the two men shouted out loud and embraced excitedly, as 300 million afghanis landed safely in front of them.

By July 1997, Massoud was preparing a counterstrike against the Taliban. The French film-maker Christophe de Ponfilly spent time in the Panjsher with Massoud that summer and recorded the operation. Even as most Afghans saw the Taliban as overwhelming in strength, Massoud spotted weaknesses, Ponfilly reported. The task was strictly military, he wrote. Massoud and his men never referred to their opponents as Taliban but as 'the enemy'.[10]

The Taliban held a front line running from Bagram Air Base to the town of Charikar. Massoud had noted that the Taliban's forces manned a series of checkposts along the two main roads crossing the Shomali Plain, but they had little presence in the agricultural land between the two parallel highways. In mid-July, Massoud's forces quietly infiltrated the walled gardens and orchards between the two roads, moving deep into enemy territory. For three days, they

lay low. ‘Hidden in houses, in gardens, behind walls, in ditches, there are thousands of fighters awaiting the order,’ Ponfilly wrote.[11] On the eve of the battle, Massoud slept on a slab of rock at a lookout high above the Shomali Plain. Even as the tanks fired their opening shells at 4 a.m., rousing everyone in the makeshift camp, Massoud slept on – ‘as Bonaparte slept before a battle,’ Ponfilly wrote.[12]

Massoud had taken weeks to prepare the operation. Each unit of thirty men knew its precise objective. ‘Multiplied by 50 or 100, that produced an army motivated by an extraordinary precision.’[13] At 4:30 a.m., Massoud sat up on his rock with a map to direct the battle. By 6:40 a.m., half of the assault was already accomplished, as units reported by radio that they had taken Bagram. Massoud turned to managing a simultaneous assault on the northern town of Kunduz, ordering in reinforcements to ramp up the pressure on the Taliban. By afternoon, his forces had taken the towns of Charikar and Gulbahar. He had relieved the blockade of the Panjsher, recovered homes and territory for thousands of displaced families, and opened the way to the capital. ‘“Kabul, Kabul” was on everyone’s lips,’ Ponfilly wrote.[14]

As evening fell, Massoud arrived in Charikar. He gave orders to transfer captured Taliban members, most of them Urdu-speaking Pakistanis, to the Panjsher, and he prayed with his men. He told them:

> Allow me to congratulate you, my brothers, on your success. I thank, and we all should, the Almighty, who, once more, accorded us His grace and goodwill. He gave us another chance to serve our people and save our country. There is no better mission than to save your people from such oppressors, men so intolerant and so far from God. We fight for freedom. For me, the worst thing would be to live a slave. You can have everything: to eat, to drink, clothes, a roof, a place to stay; but if you do not have freedom, if you do not have pride, if you are not independent, then all that has no taste, or value.[15]

Massoud was nevertheless in no rush to retake the capital, Kabul. The politician in him understood that the West had not opposed the Taliban takeover, and he calculated that it would take time to show the world, in particular Pakistan and the United States, that Taliban rule was not acceptable to many Afghans and that a mono-ethnic force that suppressed the northern tribes was unsustainable in the long term. He knew also, and was saddened by the fact, that he had lost credit

with the population of Kabul.[16] Massoud spoke to Ponfilly about his falling out with Rabbani, who had refused to step down from the presidency in 1995 when his term expired. His refusal to give up power cost the side dearly, Massoud said. It reflected badly on the party, Jamiat-i-Islami, but more widely on the entire Tajik ethnic group, and on Massoud himself, since he was the military power behind Rabbani. 'Suddenly, the institutions we were seeking to establish were devalued. How, after such behaviour, could we hope that Afghans respect us?' he said.[17]

Massoud had his own vision for a multi-ethnic state with a democratic system, and had been working on a plan with the Pashtun diplomat and politician Abdul Rahim Ghafoorzai, who had returned from abroad to help.[18] In a great meeting of minds, the commander and the diplomat hit it off, and together they resolved to build a government that would have more integrity and credibility than previous ones. Ghafoorzai was named prime minister to replace Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in the Afghan government, still the internationally recognised governing body. This plan was dashed, however, when Ghafoorzai perished in a plane crash in Bamiyan just days later, in August 1997. It was another terrible personal blow for Massoud.[19]

The Taliban were meanwhile revealing their true colours. The religious movement, which had advanced swiftly with its message of disarming militias and establishing peace and stability across the country, was becoming hated and feared for its brutal tactics. The predominant minority ethnic groups of northern Afghanistan – Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, and Turkmen – were resisting the Taliban advance, and their communities living under the Taliban were suffering harsh reprisals. The inhabitants of Kabul, who had questioned Massoud's opposition to the Taliban, had by now experienced their harsh policing at first hand.

'They realised that what they had wished for were a bunch of demons, not humans,' Amrullah Saleh recalled.[20] By late 1997, the public mood was shifting, and Massoud was even missed in Kabul, Saleh said, because the Taliban had already made massive mistakes.

Massoud remained undaunted. As the Panjsher lay deep in snow in February 1998, he sat down to write his diary in the house he had built high up on the mountainside, taking a moment to describe the scene in lyrical tones.

Jangalak
13.11.1376
[2.2.1998][21]

The sun is setting, and its last rays are about to hide behind the mountains. I can see the beautiful landscape from my library. Today from noon, I came to my library and I fixed its door and heater. The room became warm, and the library was ready for use. The valley and its mountains are covered with a blanket of snow. Only on the banks of the river does water flow, and it forms a black line along the white landscape. The snow-covered mountains, the clear skies, the Maidanshahr, and Sari-Band were all beautiful today.[22]

I have to use this opportunity to contemplate and reach a conclusion about many matters.

He then recorded a detailed analysis of the Taliban, noting the shortcomings of their situation both at home and abroad:

1. The Taliban's situation outside Afghanistan

The Taliban, who have Kabul in their possession and control more than half of the country, have been unsuccessful in receiving international recognition. Except for Pakistan, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, which do recognise them – and that is due to the tense situation in the north and Malik's defection to the Taliban – no other country has officially recognised them. The efforts of the Taliban and Pakistan to take over Afghanistan's representation, or at least to remove Professor Rabbani's representative from the United Nations, have also failed. They were only successful with the help of the Saudis to gain Afghanistan's seat at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. The reason that they have not received official recognition is the resistance to the Taliban by both the government of Afghanistan and its allies; the Taliban's improper treatment of women; their wrongful positions when it comes to individual freedom and human rights; and other unacceptable actions. [The oil company] Unocal's efforts also failed for these reasons.[23] To summarise, with the passing of every day, the situation outside Afghanistan is not in favour of the Taliban.

2. The Taliban's situation inside Afghanistan

The Taliban have lost their popularity among the people. This claim is true for both those regions that the Taliban control and those regions that they have lost. In the regions where the Taliban are in control, they have only been successful in providing security and removing checkpoints, and they haven't had any achievements in education, health care, or other sectors. The Taliban's reluctance to allow local people to administer their own regions has been taken by the people as an insult, especially to the elders and scholars residing in those places. Also, the collection of arms and ammunition in an offensive manner in those regions, and the fact that the Taliban have not been able to create a proper provincial administration to serve the needs of the people, has caused them to lose support amongst the masses. Furthermore, their forced recruitment of young men from the regions that they control, the increase in casualties, the Taliban's indifference towards the bodies of the dead and their families, their mistreatment of prisoners, the involuntary recruitment of soldiers, their defeat in many recent battles, their lack of legitimacy in the international community, and the fact that they

are uninterested in ending the war, have caused people to resent them. Another reason is that the absolute dominance of the Pashtuns, especially the dominance of the Kandahari Pashtuns, has caused people from non-Pashtun and non-Kandahari Pashtun regions to loathe them. The different factions within the movement and the exacerbation of the rivalry between the Durrani and the Ghilzai, the latter of which Mullah Omar belongs to, has also had a negative impact.[24] The unrest that grew in the Arghandab and Khakrez districts – which are dominated by the Durrani Alokozai tribe – because of the involuntary recruitment for the war that was happening, shows the internal problems that the Taliban are facing. Many of the Taliban who came to fight in the name of Islam and to serve the religion have become disappointed and have returned to their madrasas in Pakistan because of the presence of Khalqis and people who lack morals and discipline.[25] Additionally, the prevalence of Pashtun nationalism among the Taliban has caused the non-Pashtun members to become disappointed and to distance themselves. In summary, the prolongation of the war, the increase in casualties, the inability to form a viable political system, the presence of disreputable communists, the ethnic nationalism, the prevention of people's participation in the running of their own affairs, the fanaticism in regards to religion, the improper treatment of the masses, the perpetration of massacres and mass killings, the mistreatment and looting of other ethnic groups, and their unsuccessful foreign policy, have caused the Taliban to lose popular support in regions they control and even among their own people.

In areas outside Taliban control, based on the reasons mentioned above, the Taliban's ethnic nationalism, their brutal treatment of other ethnic groups, and the better situation in areas controlled by the government – in other words, the exposure of the Taliban's true identity – has not only caused the people to lose hope in them, but has caused the people to fear the Taliban, their government, and Pakistan, and to consider them their enemies. The uncivilised actions of the Taliban in the Shomali Plain, Kunduz, Mazar-i-Sharif, and, recently, in Faryab province's Qaisar district have revealed the Taliban's true nature to the people.

3. The Taliban's military situation

The Taliban in the past were militarily successful because of these reasons:

1. Their soldiers were young and provided fresh blood, possessing an extremely religious and ethnic-oriented ideology;
2. They had financial and other capabilities, such as fast vehicles (pickup trucks);
3. They had strong and effective offensive tactics (attacking at night).

Massoud's analysis of the state of the rump government's forces ranged against the Taliban, which he referred to variously as 'government forces' or 'mujahideen', was brief but frank:

The weaknesses of the mujahideen: they were tired of war, they lacked a central command and leadership, they lacked all sorts of capabilities, they lacked education and training, and, worst of all, they were not motivated to fight, and there were degenerates amongst them. However, their situation has changed now because of the following:

1. The reasons I mentioned in the previous section caused a drop in the number of fighters needed by

the Taliban. Their fighting force and level of morale has [also] dropped, and they do not possess the motivation and persistence to fight any more;

2. Recently, the Taliban has had a noticeable shortage of ammunition;
2. The mujahideen have become familiar with the Taliban's military tactics and, to an extent, they have made changes in their tactics;
3. The cooperation that the people in the government-held areas had with the Taliban has dramatically decreased.

4. The Taliban's economic situation

The Taliban's expenditures are much higher than ours. We have heard that the foreign assistance that they were receiving has been cut off. The Saudis are not assisting them any more, and the ISI might run into problems if it continues its assistance. If this is true, then the Taliban, in a financial aspect, will be limited to domestic revenue streams, which are not enough to continue a long and widespread war. Their domestic revenue comes from the trade of illicit drugs (which mostly belong to the people), timber, tariffs from border crossings, crops, etc. I haven't yet calculated whether all these domestic sources of revenue will be enough for the Taliban or not, and I am not sure if the foreign assistance that they were receiving has been cut off or not.

Massoud turned to building a united resistance against the Taliban. Just as he had built his network, the Shura-i-Nazar ('Supervisory Council'), during the Russian occupation, he now set up the United Front, drawing together Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and even Pashtun groups to show that the Taliban, which was a mainly Pashtun force, did not command support of all Afghans.[26] He also saw the United Front as the kernel for a multi-ethnic state that could bring peace to Afghanistan. According to Ponfilly, he even said the Taliban could join eventually, once they were defeated.[27] He rebuilt alliances with Dostum, with the Hazara group Hisb-i-Wahdat, and with the Pashtun leaders Sayyaf and Haji Qadir from Jalalabad, who had lost both territory and men to the Taliban but remained important leaders in the opposition. He encouraged commanders to rebuild pockets of resistance across north and central Afghanistan. He dropped a young commander, Atta Mohammad Noor, by helicopter into a mountainous area in Samangan in northern Afghanistan, with just sixteen men, and supported them for months with risky supply runs by chopper, since the Taliban controlled all access to the region.[28] In his determination to resist the Taliban, Massoud was starting to emerge as a national leader who was focused on uniting and building the opposition.

His financial difficulties persisted, and many of his fighters went unpaid for

months, which hampered his activities, even leading him to avoid meetings with his commanders because he could not pay them. But by March 1998, his talent for organisation was paying off, and he judged that the Taliban would not be able to defeat any single front. He was confident of his strength in the north-east, where support for his old opponent, Hisb-i-Islami, had collapsed. However, the Taliban, he noted, were in no mood to desist.

The Panjsher, home
1.1.1377
[21.3.1998],
3:25 p.m.

Today is the first day of the month Hamal and the first day of the new year. I was supposed to have visited Jebal Seraj and Kohistan today. I would have had a meeting with the six-member council that includes Colonel [Jilani]; Professor Farid Khan; Maulvi Sadiqi; Azimi; Attorney General Mahmoud Khan, who is the Panjsher's district chief; and Bismillah Khan. Professor Sayyaf also had a private matter to discuss with me. However, since it was the new year and I had to think about my future plans, and since I had to organise my library, I decided to stay home. Another reason why I did not travel there was because of finances. The front has no funds for a while, and any plan that I might want to implement will require money. Also, once the council meets, the heads of both Kapisa and Parwan provinces, Azimi and Farid Khan, will ask for funds. The men working for them haven't received their salaries for a while now. At the moment, there is no food, housing, money, or fuel for them. Anyhow, it is good that I stayed home, and it will be better for me to think about how to implement my plans for the first quarter of this year and especially for this month.

<u>The current situation and my future plans/programmes</u>

One obvious thing is that the Taliban will not stop fighting under any circumstances; they are not ready for peace and negotiations. The Taliban lack the strength that they had last year to defeat the United Front. Even if the Taliban wanted to launch an offensive on one of the fronts, and if they adopted a defensive strategy to keep the others, they still would not have the ability to defeat us. On the other hand, if the United Front en masse really wanted to attack Kabul, Kunduz, or Badghis, it would have the ability to defeat the Taliban in those regions. Dostum's assistance in Kunduz will be enough to subdue the Taliban. Wahdat's participation will be more useful for us in Kabul. From the explanations provided above, we will derive the following results:

1. Our main focus will once again be war;
2. Preparing ourselves, in every aspect, is vital: militarily, politically, economically, culturally, etc.;
3. All three parties have to stay united. Our unity is needed against the Taliban and, more importantly, we need to preserve it, or else the government will lose its official status and we will suffer from political, economic, and psychological problems.

We will have to build up our rear front, and our regions have to be secured by our flanks.

Regions that are part of our rear front are Parwan, Kapisa, Baghlan, Takhar, Kunduz, and Badakhshan. Our flanks are in Mazar-i-Sharif, Jowzjan, Sar-e-Pol, and Faryab. In the west:

Samangan, Bamiyan, Ghor. In the south-east: Nuristan, Kunar, Jalalabad.

The level of knowledge and understanding in our region is not bad compared to the other regions, and they are brave, hard-working, and disciplined people. The various political parties are not relevant in these regions. Ittihad's influence is limited, and Hisb-i-Islami, which was our competitor during the Jihad against the Soviets, has fragmented, and its remnants lack the courage to reveal their discontent, since they have lost the support of the people.

The next day, Massoud came to a decision to make his headquarters in a government building in Malaspa – a hamlet less than a mile upriver from his home village of Jangalak that was usefully tucked into the mountain-side, protected from aerial bombardment, and guarded by loyal villagers. He laid out plans for military, political, and governmental departments to start work.

The Panjsher, home
Sunday, 2.1.1377
[22.3.1998],
2:14 p.m.[29]

Until I find a better place, I will have my office in the Intelligence Directorate's guest house in Malaspa. It is expected that my office will be ready today. I must visit Parakh, Dashtak, and Anaba. With God's will, I will visit all of these areas, so the places that I have chosen are prepared. After so much deliberation, I have concluded that, during the first phase, my headquarters and the following places will become operational:

1. A central command with a secretariat, a room for military operations, a communications department, and an IT department;
2. Logistics, Finance, Technical, Intelligence, Political, Cultural, Operations, Education, Health, Economy, Reconstruction Directorates, and Administration for the disabled, etc. have to become operational. Some departments will be part of the Defence Ministry and some will be part of the Central Command.

Despite the reports Massoud had received of the Taliban's external finance being cut, support from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia still appeared in plentiful supply in the summer of 1998, when the Taliban redoubled its efforts to conquer the north. With a notable boost to its forces, which diplomats and intelligence officials put down to direct participation by Pakistani troops and firepower, the Taliban seized control once more of the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998, unleashing a massacre of up to 2,000 people in the process. The town of Hairatan on the Uzbek border fell too, as did the towns of Pul-i-Khumri, north of the Salang tunnel, and even Taloqan, the provincial capital of Takhar province

and an important base for Massoud. The Uzbek forces allied to Massoud suffered heavy losses, and Rabbani, still nominally the head of the Afghan government, once more had to flee to Tajikistan. Massoud ordered his men not to fight in Pul-i-Khumri, but to move out to occupy the high ground surrounding the town. The Taliban pressed their advantage and made a surprise attack on the Panjsher, sending forces from the north in an attempt to cut through the wide Khawak Pass, which runs north from the Panjsher Valley up over the mountains at a height of 14,000 feet. This would have brought the Taliban right into the centre of the valley.

Incidentally, Alexander the Great, like Tamerlane, chose to march this way, up the southern face of the Hindu Kush. I crossed it myself, heading north, when I visited Massoud in Farkhar in the summer of 1986. Some of Alexander's Greeks may have thought, like Aristotle, that from the top of the Khawak you could see the edge of the world.

Massoud instantly saw the danger the Taliban attack represented to the entire valley and even to his own survival. If the Taliban broke through to the centre of the Panjsher at Do Ab, they would cut the valley into two where defences were weakest, and could capture his stronghold. He sent his strike force to delay the Taliban advance and then made a drastic decision to evacuate his family by helicopter, and flew with them out of the valley heading north. He knew his departure was risky both politically and morally, since he was abandoning his people and his home base at their hour of greatest need, but, as he explained when reflecting on the events in his diary two years later, it was a calculated act as he prepared to fight to the death for his stronghold:

24.10.1378
[14.1.2000]
Saturday night
The Panjsher – Jangalak

If someone were to ask me 'What was the most difficult day or event of your life?', I would answer by saying 'the day I sent my family out of my country'. There was no other way. The enemy was at the closest pass of Khawak in the Panjsher; Khawak's defences were in dire condition; preparations taken by the Panjsher's bases, especially for the defence of the Panjsher's first district [Parian, in the upper Panjsher] were weak; and the bases in the Panjsher didn't have much success. Based on the reports we received, the Taliban were heading towards Khawak and were determined to attack us from behind. I thought that I would face tough battles and much worse circumstances. And if the

> enemy was able to take Khawak, especially Do Ab-i-Khawak, which is an intersection where one road leads to Parian and another towards Dasht-i-Rewat, and with the situation that the bases are facing, we would have faced a greater amount of difficulty. Therefore, I vowed to myself that I would fight to the death and prevent the enemy from entering the Panjsher. With certainty, I knew it was a difficult decision to prevent the enemy stepping one more foot beyond Do Ab and then moving south from there. I thought that in this struggle I would be martyred, and that, in that case, the situation would spin out of control and I would be unable to save my own family. For this reason, I unwillingly freed myself from the uncertainty of my family's future and, with peace of mind and without stress, I continued our war with the enemy. It was a tough decision to make, and I knew its consequences and the sorts of rumours people would have circulated had the enemy won – yet, as always, God granted me success, and I made a determined decision and personally escorted my family by helicopter to Yangi Qala. At Yangi Qala, I got off the helicopter and I went to Dasht-i-Qala in order to be closer to the fronts in Takhar. Furthermore, I would have faced extreme difficulties with our bases in the Panjsher. I knew well how my family's move and the void that was created during those tense times when I left the valley would negatively affect the people and the mujahideen there. Yet, God showed his endless grace, and the preparations that were taken in Takhar were implemented that day or the day after it, and before the dawn prayer, Takhar was liberated. Without doubt, the Almighty showed his grace to all of us.

But as Massoud departed with his family, the local fighters at Khawak, perched amid the rocky crags at the crest of the pass, were struggling to fend off the Taliban assault. The strike force had tried to stall their advance with ambushes along the way and by blocking the road with huge boulders, but the Taliban had blasted their way through at speed and cleared the blockade. They had already seized control of the western flank of the mountain pass when one of Massoud's most senior commanders, Mohammed Fahim,[30] rallied forces in Andarab and mounted an attack on the Taliban from behind. Forced to pull back from the heights, the Taliban ran into a minefield and took heavy casualties. By the end of the day, when Massoud arrived, fresh from his own victory in Takhar, the Taliban were already repulsed.

Many of Massoud's commanders, including Fahim, have described the Khawak as the most important battle of the Taliban era. Massoud's grasp of the situation, together with Fahim's fighting abilities, no doubt saved the day, but the narrow escape brought morale in the Panjsher to a new low. By the end of the summer, Massoud pulled back his forces to the Shomali Plain and the Panjsher, and gave an order to evacuate families, especially those of commanders and prominent families, as he had done with his own. Planes flying in ammunition by night to Bagram Air Base ferried out hundreds of families to Tajikistan and

the Iranian city Mashhad. Massoud gave the order not as a preparation for surrender, but to give himself and his commanders more freedom to fight, Muslem recalled. But Massoud was acutely aware of how his decision would be seen by his followers – 'a situation where people think I have sent my family away because of the war and that I have abandoned them', as he described it in his diary. Massoud was now the only opponent still standing against the Taliban.[31]

In August 1999, just days after attending a round of internationally organised peace talks, the Taliban mounted another ferocious offensive to try to take the last portion of the country not yet under their control, sending their main juggernaut back into the Shomali Plain. More than 6,000 militia members rolled through towns and villages in a well- coordinated assault by tanks, artillery, and aerial bombardment. Barry Bearak of the *New York Times* reported that the Taliban militia, 'along with thousands of Pakistanis lit with the fervor of jihad, went on a destructive spree this summer, killing wantonly, emptying entire towns, machine- gunning livestock, sawing down fruit trees, blasting apart irrigation canals. It was a binge of blood lust and mayhem described in consistent detail by witnesses.'[32] Survivors described the Taliban shooting men and boys at point-blank range, carrying off women and girls, and forcing children and old people to flee. The fighting had created 130,000 internal refugees. Many were squatting in the abandoned Soviet cultural centre in Kabul and in a camp outside Jalalabad, but the majority of them were huddled in makeshift tents in the Panjsher Valley, desperately foraging for food and firewood and facing a harsh winter. Bearak wrote:

> The onslaught was overpowering, but after a week, as the Taliban celebrated victory, they were stunned by a night-time counterattack. The opposition forces of Ahmad Shah Massoud, their sole remaining nemesis, hit back, springing ambushes and slaying hundreds – perhaps more than 1,000 – of the Taliban, who reportedly suffered even more losses in a disorderly retreat.
>
> It was a military triumph, but much of the land recovered was already ruins and scorched earth.[33]

The lush farming villages of the Shomali Plain, both Pashtun and Tajik, famous for their grapes and other fruit, lay a mine-strewn wasteland for years, the vineyards and orchards cut down and the homes and irrigation channels destroyed.

As fighting slowed in the winter months, Massoud worked to build up his political-military administration, always looking to claw back regions from Taliban control.

Dushanbe, home
Friday, 2.8.1378
[24.10.1999]

It has been about two months since intensive fighting with the Taliban eased, and as we get closer to winter and the cold weather, I foresee that we will not face another major offensive by the Taliban before next year. This is a very good opportunity for us to use to be prepared in different areas such as the political, military, economic, cultural, and social works and service sectors. And, if the opportunity presents itself, as last year, we might be able to liberate more regions. Currently, we have two major and important fronts and many secondary and tertiary fronts.

1. Our first major front is the Parwan, Kapisa, and northern Kabul front;
2. Our second major front is the one between Taloqan and Andarab;
3. In my opinion, our secondary fronts are in Dar-e-Suf and Laghman;
4. Our tertiary fronts are in Panjab [district in Bamiyan Province], Faryab, Kunar, and Jalalabad. This view is mostly based on a defensive perspective. We have mostly taken into consideration places to protect if the situation becomes dire.

Jangalak
Saturday night, 5.6.1379
[26.8.2000]

I needed to review the past year's state of affairs. I had to write down all of my positive and negative choices and decisions. Then I should have thought about my plans for next year, and I should have filled the paper with this. The reason I haven't done this till now is because of exhaustion and impatience, and I have to thoroughly think about the past and future and I have to recall each process and closely examine what it was. My instinct tells me to write more about the future than the past.

Massoud, by the end of 1998, had started to receive assistance from Iran, India, and Russia, countries that were concerned about stemming the expansion of the Taliban and its partnership with extremist groups, in particular al-Qaeda, and therefore supported the resistance. Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda, had settled in Afghanistan in 1996 and from his base there had begun a campaign of terrorist attacks against American and other international targets. His Arab fighters also bolstered the Taliban in its fight against Massoud's forces. The foreign assistance to Massoud in no way matched the support Pakistan was supplying to the Taliban, which remained overwhelmingly superior in numbers

and firepower. In September 2000, after a month of heavy fighting and intense aerial bombardment, the Taliban once again took control of the city of Taloqan, and Massoud pulled back his headquarters to the small town of Khoja Bahauddin, perched near the border with Tajikistan. He was increasingly using Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, as a rear base, and there he would visit his family and see a doctor. He never talked of giving up the fight, but his aides described mounting problems.

One day late in 2000, Dr Abdullah, who served as Massoud's main foreign affairs representative, flew in from Russia and met Massoud in Tajikistan. Massoud was trying to go back to Afghanistan, and he spoke of how difficult things were becoming. Dr Abdullah wanted to go with him to Afghanistan, but Massoud tried to put him off.

'Don't come with me. You go around, go to India, to Iran, back to Russia, see if there is something they can do to support us, like with ammunition,' Massoud told him. 'The situation is different this time around; it is very difficult,' he added.[34]

Dr Abdullah insisted on accompanying Massoud, and they flew together in one of the aging Russian helicopters. Massoud said he wanted to stop in Kulab in southern Tajikistan on the way. The pilot could not find the place and had to land on a road and ask a farmer for directions. When they reached their destination, it turned out that the stop in Kulab was to fix a leak in the helicopter's fuel tank. They flew on to Khoja Bahauddin that evening, and Massoud again told Dr Abdullah not to come. 'There was a lot of pressure on our forces, a lot of casualties, and Takhar and those areas had fallen to the Taliban,' Dr Abdullah said, 'so it was a very difficult time.'[35] Massoud never talked of giving up, he said. But he offered his commanders and aides a chance to get out.

'Are you sure that the path you are following is the right one?' he asked Dr Abdullah.

'Yes,' came the reply. Dr Abdullah set off again on another round of begging in foreign capitals, but returned with little.

'There is not much hope that those other countries will help,' he told Massoud.

'Don't worry,' Massoud replied. 'I knew it, but at least we have gone there and you have made your case. Be sure that, one day, foreign support will come

to the Panjsher. Today, these enemies, the Taliban, al-Qaeda, have hidden their faces from the people of Afghanistan. The people of Afghanistan are hoping that there will be peace through these people, and the international community is also thinking like that.' When the Taliban and al-Qaeda reveal their true faces, then the world would come to help them, he added.

'And that happened, of course,' Dr Abdullah reflected to me, 'but he was not alive. He was pretty sure about the future. He would say, "Whether we are alive or not, it will happen." He was sure of that.'

For many, the outlook seemed increasingly bleak, although those closest to Massoud insisted it was never as tough as the days when they were fighting the Soviet army with few supplies, with only donkeys for transport, and at risk of ambush by other mujahideen groups. 'We had a border with Tajikistan, and we received supplies and used helicopters,' Muslem said of the Taliban period. 'There were promises of support from the Russian side also, and the Iranians were already supporting militarily with small flights every day.'[36]

When Massoud complained about the ravages of the Taliban's tanks – in one assault fifty were ranged against them on the Shomali Plain – Muslem, who had been trained by the British SAS in the 1980s, redoubled his efforts to get a Soviet-era missile in their stores working. A wire-guided anti-tank missile known as a Spigot, the weapon was part of the Soviet arsenal taken over by the mujahideen in 1992. Muslem found a Russian officer in Tajikistan to train him on the weapon, and conducted a test firing in the Panjsher. He trained operators and deployed the weapon on the front line. 'They started targeting tanks, and the Taliban was completely paralysed, ceasing movement,' he recalled with some glee. 'This was one advantage in this war.'[37]

Despite the undoubted atrocities committed by the Taliban, Massoud was also tainted with accusations of rocket strikes on civilian areas. A fierce propaganda war broke out between the two sides. The Taliban sought to undermine the resistance, spreading rumours against Massoud through dissidents, pushing the message that the Taliban had nothing against the people of the Panjsher, but were only opposed to their leader. Massoud pushed back with his own propaganda effort. He wrote in his diary in January 2000:

> I think the most important thing that I did today was my meeting with Qanuni, Maulvi Atta al-Rahman, Hafiz Mansour, and the Operations and Intelligence Directorates. It was decided that from

> now on, to improve the spread of information and news, every Wednesday the above mentioned individuals and directorates will meet to coordinate and cooperate in order to come up with better content for the *Payam-e Mujahid* newspaper, to add information to the Friday sermons, to print and distribute pamphlets on the actions of the Taliban and their dependence on foreigners, to distribute videotapes and cassette tapes on the resistance and other matters in our regions, regions held by the Taliban, Pakistan, and other countries. I think if we can continue this, we will be able to reveal the true nature of the Taliban to the people.

He ended with a brief operational rundown:

> The commanders' training programme started today. My brothers attacked the Kiyaawa Pass, but I do not know anything about its outcome yet. Intense battles are going on in Dar-e-Suf. Based on our reports, the enemy's state of affairs is not good.

Massoud also pressed his message in interviews with foreign journalists in Dushanbe and in Khoja Bahauddin, displaying an ever-maturing political mind. In one of the last interviews he gave to a foreign journalist, in August 2001, Massoud said his vision was for an Afghanistan where every Afghan, irrespective of gender, was happy:

> I am deeply convinced that this can only be ensured by democracy and a democratically elected government, based on consensus. It is only then that we can indeed solve a number of problems that have been besetting Afghan people. The true solution lies only in such a political and social situation and only with such a type of administration in which all the tribes, all the ethnic groups and all people will see themselves fairly represented.[38]

He criticised the structure of government adopted by the Taliban as authoritarian and undemocratic:

> The very fact that the Taliban have named their administration 'emirate' is meaningful. This word itself has actually two connotations. One interpretation indicates a system in which Muslims respect the power of emir, who rules in conformity with the ideals of an Islamic state and sharia law. The other interpretation of the word 'emirate' refers to a place, a province, which is administered centrally not by an independent government but by a powerful, authoritarian emir or sultan.[39]

Drawing on examples from Afghan history, Massoud said that the Afghan ruler Amir Abdur Rahman, who ruled from 1880 to 1901, had not been independent, since he had collaborated with the British Raj – whereas King Amanullah, a reformist successor to the throne who reigned from 1919 to 1929, had

purposefully relinquished the title of amir and proclaimed himself king instead, 'in order to dissociate [himself] from the tradition of centralised and authoritarian power that adheres to the paradigm of a strictly Islamic state,' Massoud said. 'The Taliban rules stick precisely to such a doctrinaire tradition.'[40]

He disparaged the Taliban's enforcement of rules that every man had to wear a black turban, and every student too:

> They not only prescribe what people should wear, but they also invade all types of your privacy … Most of these things are dictated by the Pakistan side. It is the aim of Pakistan to see the Afghan state and its institutions collapse totally. One aim of Pakistani policy is to reduce Afghanistan to an aggregate of different tiny emirates, ruled indirectly by Pakistan. In this way, they endeavour to subordinate Afghanistan culturally, politically, and economically to Pakistan.[41]

He said that he had been informed six years earlier, even before the Taliban took Kabul, about such a Pakistani plan to divide Afghanistan into individual emirates.

Even as the world saw Massoud as inexorably backed into a corner in his battle against the Taliban, he insisted the resistance was turning a corner and regenerating. 'We have actually been able to expand resistance against the Taliban and counteract them and their ideology,' he said, adding that anti-Taliban groups were fighting in Ghor, Herat, and Badghis provinces:

> In the past it was beyond imagination that we would be able to come back there and start resistance against the Taliban. Last year the Taliban proudly proclaimed to the world: 'We have conquered all of Afghanistan.' … As you can see here yourself, this resistance against the Taliban has been rapidly expanding.[42]

Massoud also said, 'It is only possible if you have the support of ordinary people. Hence we have to see whether in the passage of time we have still managed to gain more support, sympathy and understanding from the people.'[43]

He noted a shift in international attitudes to the Taliban and growing international support for the resistance. The United States had accused Osama bin Laden of orchestrating terror attacks on its embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and demanded that the Taliban, who had granted him leave to stay in Afghanistan, hand him over. CIA officials had started to beat a path to

Massoud's door to ask him for help.

In a diary entry in March 2000, he described the shift, but warned that he could not see Pakistan or the Taliban changing their ways to cease their offensive.

Jangalak
5–6.1.1379
[24–25.3.2000]

The Taliban have become weaker militarily, but they haven't changed their decision about ending the war. Their proposals to us to come and join their government are by no means a call for joint cooperation for a better future for this country, but another way of demanding our capitulation. Pakistan's government, with the removal of Nawaz Sharif from power and the rise of Pervez Musharraf, has not brought any change in its policies towards Afghanistan, and has continued its previous approach, and now, since all power lies in the hands of one group, they are able to accelerate their plans for Afghanistan. We too have not made any change in our resolve to defend our land, our people, and our country's independence, and we are determined, with the help of God, to continue our armed struggle until the Taliban come to terms with a rational solution to this conflict and Pakistan loses hope of gaining a military victory here. The Americans and Saudis have stopped their support for the Taliban, and with every passing day they have increased their pressure on the Taliban and Pakistan because the Taliban movement is harbouring Osama bin Laden in Kandahar, and because of the close relationship that Pakistan's ISI has with bin Laden and Mullah Omar. Additionally, all other countries and international organisations, whether Western countries, the Russians, or neighbouring countries, except for Pakistan and China, have also increased their pressure on the Taliban and Pakistan for numerous reasons. Yet, none of this has caused the Taliban and Pakistan to change. Currently, Musharraf is pushing the Taliban to swiftly take over all of Afghanistan in order to provide the world with a fait accompli and allow him to implement his strategy for Central Asia and Kashmir. I do not believe that the pressure from the international community and America will reach a level this year to cause Pakistan to end its interference in Afghanistan's affairs and to cause the Taliban to end their brutalities. We can conclude with the assumption, which is closer to reality, that the war will continue throughout this year.

Massoud's diary entries recorded events big and small. His breadth of mind and intellectual curiosity prompted me to describe Massoud at a memorial for him in Kabul as a 'man for all seasons'.

Jangalak
Friday night, 5.6.1379
[26.8.2000]

Today, in addition to other things, I had a bath. As usual, I finished office work. One part of it was once again on the organisation, salaries, subsidies, positions, and ranks of the central forces. Since the

beginning of this year, I have been able to read more. Besides a book on grammar, I am currently reading Ã*yeen-e Zendagi* [‘The creed of life’] by [Mohamed Akram] Nadwi, from India, and *Haft* Ã*dat Mardãn-e Buzurg* [‘The seven habits of highly effective people’] by a Western author [Stephen Covey]. I would like to learn Arabic, professional writing, and oratory. I really need all three of these skills, but my laziness has caused me to not achieve any of these goals – in particular, my weakness in oratory has caused me to lose great opportunities. As far as I can think, I have talent in oratory, and, with hard work, I am not bad at writing either. During my years in school, I thought that I clearly lacked talent in mathematics, but over time, with round-the-clock hard work and diligence, and with God’s grace, it was revealed to me that I did have talent in mathematics and that it was merely the teachers’ laziness and their inability to teach properly that caused me to seem weak in lessons. Strangely, I acknowledge the need to learn professional writing and oratory, but I have never bothered myself to pursue them.

Although Massoud kept a diary right up until his death, I have seen only a few selected extracts from his later diaries. The last entry I have seen records the escape of Ismail Khan, his ally from western Afghanistan, from a Taliban prison nine months before his death. Massoud’s entry is brief and to the point, shorn of all drama, and he soon turns to other developments.

Home – Jangalak
Wednesday night, 10.11.1379
[29.1.2001]

The weather was cloudy and rainy today. It is still raining at the moment. I received news this morning that Ismail Khan has arrived safely in Iran. From what his son said, Ismail Khan and a prison guard, the guard’s father, and two or three other prisoners escaped from prison in Farah after the morning prayer and fled in a Land Cruiser to Zahedan through the Chahar Burjak district in Nimruz. When the vehicle came close to an area controlled by the mujahideen, it was destroyed by an anti-vehicle mine and the guard who was with them was injured from the thigh down. Everyone else, including Ismail Khan, escaped injury and is in good health.

Yesterday, Fahim Khan pointed out that the enemy is mobilising its forces near Imam Sahib in Kunduz. After sunset today, I spoke with Aimaq, who is responsible for the mujahideen in Kunduz. He gave me reports from Archi that the enemy can be seen in Shahidaan, and he asked for ammunition and fuel.

21

‘My Father was Incorruptible’

In the course of a long conversation with me in London in 2015, Massoud’s only son, Ahmad – who was at the time studying at King’s College London for a degree in war studies – painted a very frank and revealing picture of his father at a time when, Ahmad said, he was very young, and his father was deeply involved in fighting the Taliban.

Ahmad and I had been introduced by some Foreign Office diplomats who were looking after Ahmad; this was some time after his father had been assassinated. I started by asking him what sort of a father Massoud was.

He replied, ‘I don’t know if [this] is an easy question or a hard question, to be honest. As his son and one of his children – he taught us so many things, though I was very young. I will give you a few examples from my life.’

Ahmad began by recalling the day when a group of Hazaras – Shia tribesmen from central Afghanistan – came to visit Massoud, walking all the way from Bamiyan, the site of the famous Buddha statues destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001, to his father’s headquarters at Khoja Bahauddin on the northern border with Tajikistan. Young Ahmad met the Hazaras on arrival. Afterwards, at home, he reported to his father that they were extremely tired after their journey and, in trying to articulate this, he inadvertently used a Persian expression that means ‘low class’. His father thought he was being derogatory, and became angry.

‘He got so mad, he held my ear,’ Ahmad recalled, ‘and said, “Who the hell are you to talk about people like that? We are all equal. We are all human.”’ It wasn’t just about their own people, Ahmad said. ‘I remember once I was playing

Lego, and I created a Mullah Omar without eyes. At first, he [Massoud] smiled and laughed. But then he said, “Don’t do it, even with your enemies. We respect every single human being.” He wasn’t a person who used to tell me, “Son, don’t do it, this is the Koran, this is Islam, this is what your religion says, this is about our books…” No, no – he was giving me examples by his actions. He was not someone just to talk and not do anything; he was teaching us by his own example.

‘Regarding the family and being honest,’ Ahmad continued, ‘he was a very, very, very honest person; he was not at all corrupt. He was incorruptible.’

Describing his father’s problems with money, and the family budget, Ahmad said, ‘When he was alive, our budget was only $300 per month, and then later, in the last years of his life, we had problems, and he was like, “I can’t manage it any more; please reduce it.” He told Tariq [his brother-in-law], who was in charge of the family budget when he was away, to reduce the money – make it half, just $150 a month, even $100 a month, I think, and my mother was like, “No, we cannot do this, we cannot survive, and also we have guests, and living costs a lot.” My father was like, “No, I don’t understand. I have no money. It isn’t [as though] the government gives me a salary, like $1,000 a month or something; I don’t have money… We used to live in a very poor house… we used to live where we had meat once a week or – in Tajikistan, we were living by ourselves.”’

After Massoud captured Kabul in 1992, some well-off residents who had lived under the Afghan communist and Soviet regimes, and who were possibly scared of mujahideen retaliation, fled the city, leaving their houses empty. A number of mujahideen commanders saw their chances, and managed to acquire some very handsome houses at little or no expense. Ahmad told me his grandfather, Tajuddin, and his grandmother told their son-in-law, Massoud, ‘Now is the time for you to buy a house in Kabul for your family.’

Ahmad continued, ‘You know what my father’s response was? “Well, if there is a time that, let’s say, the Taliban come, or a time that the enemy comes, if I held the whole of Afghanistan, it would mean nothing. If there is a time that Afghanistan is free, then every single house in Afghanistan is my house, so I don’t need a house.” That was his answer, so, until his death, his last day, we didn’t have a house except the one which was in his father’s house [property], in

the Panjsher Valley – so we didn't have any houses. We don't own any houses in Kabul.'

I said, 'But your father built that large house on the family property in Jangalak, in the Panjsher.'

'Yes,' replied Ahmad, 'but we never had a house in Kabul.'

I asked if his father received a salary from the state. He said he did, but it was so small that 'it wasn't worth counting'.

Massoud was 'very, very serious' about the cost of himself and his family to the state, Ahmad said. 'I remember, many times, he told his people, colleagues, and the people working for him, "Be very careful about money that belongs to [the] people and the government. Do not spend a cent of the government's money on my personal stuff, otherwise you will answer to God on Judgement Day.'' That was always his answer to the people working with him, especially the people who were in charge of the Treasury. So, he was really honest, really kind to many people.

'One thing about my father that many people don't know: he was completely different when he was at home. Many people think of him as a strong military leader who was very, very strict, very hard, but when he was at home, he was very, very kind. He used to play with us, watch TV; he used to watch Charlie Chaplin with us, sit, laugh, play, and teach us stuff, work with me, read Hafez and Rumi [Persian classical poets] with me, tease my mother, tease my family, my uncles. Inside the house, he was full of energy and life. We could not wait to see him again, because there are some fathers – their kids don't want to see their fathers, because they are mad all the time. But we could not wait to see him. I remember, when he used to come back from work, my love, my passion, was to somehow make him happy. When he was sitting, I would take off his boots. He didn't want it. He was like, "What are you doing, son? Go away," but I would be, "No, no, I like it, I like this." But he was like, "Go away," and I was like, "No, no, I like it," and I used to bring a big pot, bucket, of hot water to put his leg in and slowly, slowly rub it, massage it. When he was washing his face and hands, I used to take the towel and go wait for him outside the bathroom. That is how he behaved; that is how much we loved him. He was extraordinary, amazing.'

I asked Ahmad if he had put his father's foot in hot water because he had an

injury of some kind.

‘No, I wanted him to have comfort,’ Ahmad said. ‘I wanted it, but he didn’t want it.’

In reply to my question about Massoud ever getting tired, Ahmad described how he worked non-stop. ‘He did not know anything about a weekend or holidays. For him, Friday or Sunday meant nothing, because he had no holidays; he was working constantly, 24/7. He was only forty-nine when he passed away, but in the last years of his life we could see that physically he was really tired – in the last years against the Taliban.’

One of the symptoms of stress with which Massoud increasingly suffered was intense back pain. ‘He couldn’t sit on a normal chair,’ Ahmad explained. ‘He had a special attachment they used to put on [his] chair, and then he could sit on it. When I think about how he could manage against, first, the former communist government and then, when the Russians came, against the Russians – then, after that, against the [Najibullah] government, after that, against Dostum and Hekmatyar, the factional fighting, and then the Taliban… Sometimes I think that the strength that he had was coming from somewhere else, it was so special. He was full of energy, his morale was good, [but] even he had his limits.’

‘At the end,’ I asked, ‘was he exhausted?’ Ahmad said Massoud was ‘not getting help from anywhere, and that is exhausting. In front of us, his morale was good. He was full of energy when he was in front of his troops, his people. For us, back in those days, we had a quotation, an expression: as long as Amer Saheb [‘honourable leader’ or ‘boss’] – which was his nickname – as long as he was alive, we were OK. We didn’t care about anything. Everyone – every single person that I knew from the [Panjsher] Valley, Kabul, Shomali, everyone – felt that, as long as God and Amer Saheb existed, we didn’t care, we had nothing to worry about, because our perception was that he was immortal.

‘First of all, he would never die. We could never imagine that one day he wouldn’t be there. The second thing is that there was nothing that he could not get over, there was no one problem that he could not solve, no one obstacle that he could not overcome – even in the worst time, which was the time of the Taliban, when they surrounded the Panjsher and many people lost their homes, but even at that time we were not that worried, because Ahmad Shah Massoud was there. That is how we were thinking. He was a superhero for us, for the

whole nation; he was a superhero for everybody, not only the Panjsher but the whole of Afghanistan.'

Among Massoud's national supporters, Ahmad mentioned Haji Qadir, the governor of Jalalabad and a member of the influential Pashtun Arsala family; Mullah Naqib, head of the powerful Pashtun Alikozai tribe in Kandahar; the Hazara leaders Mohaqiq and Khalili; and Ismail Khan, the strongman of Herat. (Afghanistan being extremely tribal in its outlook, the fact that two of his greatest supporters were prominent Pashtuns is impressive.) Later, Abdul Haq – one of Haji Qadir's brothers and a prominent mujahideen commander himself, famous for having his photograph taken on the steps of Number 10 Downing Street with the British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher – became an ally of Massoud.[1]

Ahmad described the many ups and downs his father suffered in the period after his successful capture of Kabul in 1992. In 1995, he had tried to reach agreement with the Taliban at Maidanshahr, south-west of Kabul, where he went alone, without bodyguards, to talk to various Taliban leaders.

'So, my father talked to them, and was like, "You are Muslim, I am Muslim, we both want a good future for Afghanistan." They were like, "Yes, we both want the same." Massoud went on, "So, let's all of us come together and find a solution for Afghanistan. Why do you want to destroy the country? Let's find a solution." The Taliban, who were so full of themselves, were like, "No, what we want is you guys to put down your guns, become our prisoners, and then we'll decide what to do." We knew what they wanted to do, they would kill all of us, we knew it. "Yes, lay down your arms and accept." My father didn't accept. My father found out that the negotiations had failed. They actually let my father go from Maidanshahr. They could easily have captured and killed him because he was all alone, he had no bodyguards whatsoever.'

After the Taliban took Kabul, Massoud tried to form a new government with Abdul Rahim Ghafoorzai, the prime minister of Afghanistan, of whom he wrote in his diary, 'I think that I found my soulmate, my other half '. Ahmad explained to me, 'That is how close my father was to Mr Ghafoorzai, and [he] counted on him as his other half, adding, "Mr Ghafoorzai can change the whole concept of Afghanistan, the whole problem in the region." Ghafoorzai promised my father several things – first, "to sort out the relationship, the problem that you have

with the West, I am going to solve it; and the relationship you have with Pakistan, as long as" – as my father always said – "as long as Pakistan stops supporting the Taliban. The Taliban are all over Afghanistan; as soon as they [the Pakistanis] stop supporting them, the Taliban will not survive and will not be able to defend their territory in Afghanistan for one day." So, my father was waiting for the recognition we needed from the West, for Pakistan to stop supporting the Taliban, and then to establish a proper Afghan government. Ghafoorzai was Pashtun but, just like my father, believed in Afghanistan as one united and free country. He also believed in social justice.'

Then disaster struck. The plane flying Ghafoorzai to Bamiyan for important talks to set up a government crashed, killing him and all the other passengers. As Ahmad put it, as a result of those talks, they would have formed an alternative government, 'so that, when we took over Kabul, everything would automatically be in place. So the chaos we had after the mujahideen got to Kabul the first time wouldn't happen again. That was my father's "position", not to have a second period of chaos, because after the first experience, my father always used to say we went to Kabul too soon. He was predicting that they would get to Kabul two years later, but it happened two years earlier. We were not ready to go to Kabul, and the jihad, the fighting, and our revolution were not well done – they were half-baked. So, Ghafoorzai went to Bamiyan and the plane crashed.'

No one knew the cause of the crash, Ahmad said. 'No one worked on it or investigated. My father was devastated; he was so sad. I remember it was like someone who had lost all of his hopes, he was exhausted, because you fight and also you work politically, you work so hard for something else because you want to achieve your political, military goals – and then, combined together, you achieve something, so, yes, my father was devastated, but he didn't give up.

'That is the one thing about him: he lost so many people, so many commanders, so many friends and close relatives, but he never gave up. Even at the end, he never gave up, at the end of his life, until the last minute… he continued everything about the conference, the London Conference, and the purpose of the London Conference, why he came to the West, and his purpose for coming to the West and Strasbourg to talk in the European Parliament…'[2]

I suggested that Massoud was trying to get support.

Ahmad said his father wanted not only support but for the world – Afghans

living abroad, and educated people who saw that Afghanistan was a country that needed a proper government – to come and help. He wanted the London Conference to provide a solution for Afghanistan – that was his intention: that Afghans would provide the solution, just as he and Ghafoorzai had found a solution. But, unfortunately, Ghafoorzai passed away too soon.

I suggested that Massoud saw Ghafoorzai as a sort of fellow leader with whom he could jointly solve problems. 'Exactly,' said Ahmad. 'Ghafoorzai was prime minister under Rabbani.' Then, changing tack, Ahmad said his father 'sometimes looked so exhausted' after experiencing blows like losing Ghafoorzai and losing Commander Panna, one of his best and bravest commanders, who was killed by the Taliban in Kabul. 'Losing people like that, losing the chance of achieving something, because for himself, losing an operation, or the Panjsher, or, let's say, Kabul wasn't that important – but, for him, actually trying to reach some goals and aims and not being able to reach them was very exhausting. It was really, really a bad time.

'Later, he was so happy; he had started to make a proper half-professional army in north Afghanistan, and police as well. We didn't need police back then, but he was preparing to train police as well. Principally, however, he was preparing an organised army, so they would be ready when we took over Kabul, the city, and the country. It would be organised and in good hands. So, he was preparing that.'

I asked Ahmad when this was happening, and he said it was in the last years of his father's life, 'because he was building for the future, he was waiting for that moment. He was getting the country ready militarily and politically – he was waiting for those political aims to happen: "That was where we had a problem, and we need a government when we are in Kabul. Imagine, if we get into Kabul now…" – we were sitting with my father at breakfast, and I asked him, "What happened to you? You used to be very strong, you defeated the Russians, you fought the Taliban, Dostum, you defeated Hekmatyar, but now you are struggling with the Taliban; what is wrong with you? You used to be very strong, what has happened?" My father laughed and said, "Son, if I want to take over Kabul," – I will never forget this, he explained it so clearly, I still remember it – he said, "If I want to take over Kabul, capture Kabul, now it is breakfast time, and I will have my supper in Kabul tonight, but I am not sure that I will have the

same breakfast tomorrow in Kabul. To capture Kabul is easy, but it is hard to hold Kabul, a city, a government: you need a strong political structure."

'Imagine we would go back to Kabul: after one month, after one week, the traditional leaders would say one thing and some of the commanders would say something else, because they were not ready, they were classic leaders, classic authority, classic government. My father wanted a professional government, and that is why my father asked Mr Ghafoorzai, who was educated in the West; he was never in the war, he was never even in jihad, he was counting on him as someone whom my father thought of as his other half. That was how important he thought Mr Ghafoorzai was; as an educated person from outside Aghanistan who had the same mentality, beliefs, as my father, that every single person in this country has the same rights, it doesn't matter if he is Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, or Hazara. That was his aim, and he found it… that's where we learned a lot about respecting people; it doesn't matter if he is black or white, if he is Jew or Muslim, Tajik or Pashtun, we didn't care in our family, because he taught us we are all human and we have to respect everyone.'

22

Massoud Visits Europe

In March 2001, the Taliban blew up the Buddhas of Bamiyan, colossal 100-foot statues hewn out of the living rock, ‘one of man’s most remarkable achievements’, as the historian Nancy Dupree described them. Created in the third and fourth centuries, they were ‘the most spectacular images of the Buddha ever devised’, ‘the embodiment of cosmic man’, standing ‘not so much as a God but as an extraordinary man, one who participates in human experiences but exists above them’. The Buddhas had attracted pilgrims for centuries, she wrote.[1]

The demolition was an act of sacrilege, of wanton destruction, and a sign of the increasing extremism of Taliban rule under Mullah Omar and the malevolent influence of al-Qaeda. Denounced around the world, the destruction of the Buddhas was also a portent of the great disaster that was to come, and it set in motion the series of events that ended Massoud’s life.

The Arab volunteers who had been drawn in to help the Afghans fight against the Soviet invasion in the 1980s had, by the end of the 1990s, formed a powerful organisation of their own, which increasingly led Afghanistan towards a clash with the West. Osama bin Laden had returned to live in Afghanistan in 1996 and built a close relationship with Mullah Omar, supplying the Taliban with money, training, and recruits in return for a safe harbour, from where he plotted his international terrorist attacks. Some Arabs had developed a particular antipathy for Massoud, who had refused to allow Arab fighters to set up their own fronts in the northern territory under his command. The issue caused a schism in the Arab jihadi movement. Critics accused Massoud of being pro-Western and not a true

Muslim. Abdullah Azzam, the founder of the Maktab al-Khidamat (‘Afghan Services Bureau’), the forerunner of al-Qaeda, praised Massoud highly after visiting him in the Panjsher in 1988, even comparing him to Napoleon. Yet Azzam was assassinated in a bomb attack in Peshawar in 1989, and the extremist anti-Massoud camp – namely, bin Laden and a core of Egyptians led by bin Laden’s deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri – took over the organisation in the months after his death.[2]

By 2001, they had conducted a string of bombings around the world. Nicole Fontaine, a French politician and the president of the European Parliament at the time, was moved to action by the Taliban’s atrocities. She had previously asked Philippe Morillon – the French general who, as head of the United Nations peacekeeping force in Bosnia, had famously vowed to stand by the besieged Muslims during that war and had since become a member of the European Parliament – to visit the Panjsher in June 2000 in a gesture of support for the resistance to the Taliban. Now Fontaine was determined to do something more, and she invited Ahmad Shah Massoud to visit the European Parliament in Strasbourg. She wrote afterwards, ‘As head of the largest democratic parliament in the world, which represents 380 million citizens, I feel completely in solidarity with the resistance against the most hateful fanaticism.’[3]

So, in April 2001, aged forty-eight, the legendary guerrilla commander, dressed in tan fatigues with his roll-brimmed wool *pukul* tilted on the back of his head, made his first visit to Western Europe. (He had vowed not to leave Afghan soil as long as the Russians were in occupation.) He met officials in Paris, Strasbourg, and Brussels, and held a noisy press conference at the five-star Méridien Montparnasse Hotel in Paris, packed with the world’s media and Afghans from all over Europe.

‘In Paris, I do not feel a stranger,’ he smilingly told a correspondent of *Le Monde*, a nod to his education at the Lycée Esteqlal in Kabul.[4] He was accompanied by representatives of each of the ethnic groups of his United Front: Hazara, Pashtun, Tajik, and Uzbek.

Fontaine later wrote, ‘We expected a warlord. What we saw was someone who was seeking a political solution, as a true architect of peace. I will never forget that day.’[5]

The French government quibbled over meeting Massoud, to the point where

Morillon and Fontaine bemoaned official spinelessness and lack of foresight. The French foreign minister, Hubert Védrine, who had on three occasions held meetings with Taliban ministers, only reluctantly granted Massoud a breakfast meeting. Massoud also had meetings with the president of the French Senate, Christian Poncelet, and the president of the French National Assembly, Raymond Forni, before he travelled to the European Parliament in Strasbourg, where he was given a standing ovation. Patricia Lalonde, a French human rights activist, wrote, 'Finally, the fight was going to bear fruit. Massoud was going to be heard.'[6]

For Massoud, the trip was an attempt to wake up Europe and the West to the worldwide danger that extremist Islamism represented. It was far larger than just the Taliban, he warned, because behind the Taliban were their Pakistani backers, the ISI – whom he described as the Pakistani secret service – and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda and its ranks of foreign fighters. In several public appearances, he spoke critically of bin Laden, calling him a 'terrorist' and a threat to the West, and appealing for Western support to fight him. The extremist Islamist agenda was fixed on dominating Afghanistan and the wider region, he said.

'Behind the whole situation in Afghanistan, and all those extremist groups, there is the regime in Pakistan, and especially the military part of the regime and its intelligence service, which is supporting all these extremist groups,' he told a news conference in the European Parliament. In news footage of the event, Fontaine, sitting beside him, nods in agreement. The United States would become a target of those same extremists if it did not act, Massoud said. 'My message to President [George W.] Bush is the following: If peace is not re-established in Afghanistan, if he doesn't help the Afghan people, it is certain that the problem of Afghanistan will also affect the United States and a lot of other countries … Their objectives are not limited to Afghanistan,' he said. 'They consider Afghanistan as the first phase to a long-term objective in the region and beyond.'[7]

Masood Khalili had accompanied Massoud to Paris and Strasbourg, and he emphasised the importance of Massoud's message: 'His message was that he was fighting against terrorism that was a threat to his country and also the world. He spoke about Osama bin Laden, saying that he was a terrorist. He asked for help to fight against Osama's terrorists, Arabs and non-Arabs alike,' Khalili

recalled. ‘In his speech at the Parliament in France, he spoke about the coalition of terrorists, Osama and the Arabs, extreme Pakistanis and non-Arab extremists across the world. He said they were helped and encouraged by Pakistan’s ISI.’ Massoud’s outspokenness was to seal his fate, Khalili concluded. ‘In these interviews he was a threat to the terrorists. He was making a stand against them. He saw terrorists as a threat, and they saw him as a threat.’[8]

Massoud appealed repeatedly for world leaders to press Pakistan to cease its interference in Afghanistan. ‘The end of the war in Afghanistan is in the hands of the international community, which must exercise strong pressure on Pakistan,’ he said. And he called on the world to redouble its humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people, many of whom had been displaced by Taliban offensives and were short of food. ‘The humanitarian situation has reached a catastrophic scale,’ he said. ‘Last winter, we had a very harsh winter, in the Panjsher Valley especially, over a metre of snow on one occasion, and there are internally displaced people in those areas, and the United Nations agencies only provided those refugees with one sack of wheat for the whole winter, and this was only after we made several demands through different channels. So, considering the scale of the problem, it shows the urgency of the action needed.’[9]

He said he was not seeking military intervention, but needed international support: ‘We have not asked, and we don’t need military personnel or foreign troops to defend our land, the people of Afghanistan are ready to resist and defend their land, but of course that resistance requires support.’ And if Pakistan were forced to end its interference, he predicted the Taliban would swiftly fold. ‘I am sure if the support from Pakistan to the Taliban is stopped, the Taliban could not sustain their campaign as much as a year.’[10]

He offered his own vision for a moderate Islamist democratic state of Afghanistan that the West could work with, and challenged the Taliban to test their popularity in a free election. ‘The Taliban say that they represent the legitimate government, that they have a popular base and they have popular support. I have made this challenge on several occasions to them, that if you do claim you have popular support, then why not test it through free elections? I challenge them once again, and I invite observers from the international community to monitor such free elections in Afghanistan. This would be the

right test for what is happening there, and their claims.’[11]

Massoud’s visit made headlines, but brought no real shift in world politics. His enemies were furious, however, and they vowed to stop him.

23

How They Killed Massoud

In mid-August 2001, dwarfed by the imposing outriders of the Hindu Kush of north-east Afghanistan, two Arab ‘journalists’ travelled from Kabul to the Panjsher Valley with an escort of Taliban, who were then the de facto rulers of Afghanistan. They had taken the secondary road, which runs up the Tagab Valley[1] from the small town of Sarobi, halfway between Jalalabad and Kabul, to another small town, called Gulbahar. A few miles before Gulbahar, the gateway to the Panjsher Valley, the stronghold of Massoud, they stopped at a checkpoint that marked the front line between the Taliban and Massoud’s forces.

The Arab ‘journalists’, travelling on Belgian passports, which turned out to have been stolen from a Belgian embassy and consulate, passed themselves off as Belgian nationals of Moroccan origin. They were, in fact, Tunisians recruited as assassins by al-Qaeda.[2] The older one, Abdessattar Dahmane, aged thirty-nine, was pale-skinned, slightly pudgy, and wore glasses. The younger one, Bouari el-Ouaer, aged thirty-one, the ‘cameraman’, was bigger and stronger, and looked like a boxer. Both were clean-shaven and wore Western shirts and trousers.

At the checkpoint, the Arabs were expected, and on Massoud’s orders, Bismillah Khan, the commander of this part of the front, had sent a car to meet them. They were escorted by Panjsheri mujahideen to another checkpoint a few miles away – a two-storey house built into the rock at the narrowest part of the gorge, which constitutes the entrance to the Panjsher Valley. In charge were guards belonging to one of Massoud’s close allies, the Pashtun leader Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, head of the Ittihad-i-Islami. Sayyaf was a controversial figure,

ultra-Sunni and conservative, an Arabic speaker and Islamic scholar who had studied at Egypt's prestigious Al-Azhar University, thanks to which he had enjoyed close links with – and generous financial support from – Saudi Arabia throughout the jihad of the 1980s.

A month or so earlier, Sayyaf had received a telephone call out of the blue from an old friend from the jihad, an Egyptian called Abu Hani. The two men used to write articles about the jihad for an Arabic-language magazine. Abu Hani had fought alongside the Afghan mujahideen during the 1980s, but left Afghanistan for Bosnia after the Soviet withdrawal. Sayyaf had not heard from his old comrade for years, but accepted his claim that he was calling by satellite telephone from Bosnia. Abu Hani called him twice in the summer of 2001 to ask him to help two Arab journalist friends who wanted to visit the Panjsher and interview the leaders of the United Front. Sayyaf agreed to cooperate. So, the two Arab 'journalists' had, as it were, a ready-made entrée.[3]

Dahmane was the lead man of the pair, chosen as the 'interviewer'. Born on 27 August 1962 in Gabès, a Tunisian town on the Mediterranean coast, Dahmane was raised in Jendouba, a small town in the impoverished north-west of Tunisia, where his father ran a grocery store. He studied journalism in Tunis, obtaining a diploma, but was an unremarkable student, self-effacing and quiet, according to his professors.[4] He fell in love with a very pretty Tunisian girl with long brown hair, a fellow journalism student; after moving to Belgium, where he hoped to acquire further qualifications, he married her and brought her to join him. But the marriage did not last, and they divorced. Dahmane enrolled at three different universities, including the Université catholique de Louvain, but never succeeded in graduating. Academically a dropout, he risked losing his residence permit in Belgium, and without a degree could not find stable work. He was at a low ebb by the mid-1990s, when he seems to have been befriended by al-Qaeda. A Tunisian friend, Tarek Maaroufi, an Islamic nationalist with Belgian citizenship who was later imprisoned for terrorist activities, implanted another idea in his mind: jihad in Afghanistan. Dahmane frequented the Centre islamique belge in Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, which was run by Sheikh Bassam Ayachi – a Syrian with a lifetime of involvement in international jihad, who introduced Dahmane to his second wife, Malika el-Aroud, and who officiated at their religious marriage three months later. Dahmane showed all the signs of growing

radicalism. He grew a beard, gave up his Western clothes and alcohol, and refused to shake hands with women. El-Aroud's younger sister, Saida, described him as intolerant, and told how, when he discovered his Lebanese brother-in-law was a Shia Muslim, he left the family table and walked out of the house, ordering el-Aroud to follow him.[5]

El-Aroud, an unmoored single mother of Moroccan origin in Belgium, who had also been radicalised after joining classes at the Centre islamique belge, described him as gallant. When she fell ill with tuberculosis, he cared for her. Years after his death, she said he had dreamed of being under Osama bin Laden's orders. 'It's easy for me to describe the love my husband felt because I felt it myself,' she said. 'Most Muslims love Osama. It was he who helped the oppressed. It was he who stood up against the biggest enemy in the world, the United States. We love him for that.'[6]

El-Aroud was all in favour, and decided it was their duty to go to Afghanistan. Dahmane, who had no proper job and therefore no real income, said that he would go first and his hot-blooded wife would follow. At this point, another Tunisian Belgian, Adel Tebourski, who was al-Qaeda's logistician, stepped in and supplied the Dahmanes, husband and wife, with money, tickets, and passports. So, when Dahmane and his accomplice, el-Ouaer, set off for London to collect their visas from the Pakistani High Commission, the well-oiled machine was expecting them. They were provided with one-year multiple-entry visas – virtually unheard of for visiting journalists. A few days later, they flew to Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. All this would seem to confirm that the whole operation had been carefully planned and that Pakistan's ISI was deeply involved.

In Pakistan, one presumes, they were briefed on their onward passage via the Khyber Pass to Afghanistan and to one of the training camps run by bin Laden, at Darunta, only a few miles from Jalalabad. I remember, as a Westerner with charity interests in Jalalabad, occasionally eating at one of the fish restaurants on the river at Darunta and occasionally bumping into Arabs being trained in the village, who, when they learned we were British, tended to behave aggressively. Al-Qaeda courses at Darunta seem to have involved mainly weapons training, bomb-making, and physical fitness.

When el-Aroud arrived at the end of January 2001, she noticed how fit

Dahmane looked. They were provided with a house by al-Qaeda in Jalalabad – at first not a very good one, but later a much better one. Dahmane was being groomed for bigger things. In August 2001, he told el-Aroud he had been given a camera and a job as a journalist. His first task was to do reportage in the enemy camp of Massoud. 'Perhaps I will not return from the front,' he told his wife. She replied that if he died before her, she would not survive him by long.[7]

He left Jalalabad for Kabul on 12 August. Within a few days, he and his accomplice were already in the Panjsher. They spent several days as the 'guests' of Sayyaf at his office at the entrance to the Panjsher Valley, and then stayed in Charikar with Bismillah Khan, who arranged for them to be escorted to film on the front lines.

The Panjsheris had a rule not to let Arabs into the Panjsher Valley, but, since Massoud's visit to Europe, there was a growing understanding among its leaders that they needed to reach out to the wider world. This had to include the Arab world and the rich Persian Gulf countries that supported Pakistan and the Taliban, to show them that the Afghans resisting the Taliban were indeed Muslim too, and that the war against them was unjust.

I interviewed an old comrade-in-arms of Massoud, a fellow Panjsheri and his unofficial chief of staff for many years, Engineer Mohammad EsHaq, about the attitude to Arabs in general. His answer was that Massoud's close ally, the pro-Arab Sayyaf, believed it was important to project Massoud's image and message to the Arab world.[8]

'We should look at the situation,' he told me, 'the mental and physical situation we were in.' He meant that in late 2001, Massoud was fighting the Taliban 'with his back to the wall', alone, with little or no support from the West – whereas the Taliban were backed by the military power of Pakistan and the ISI, and virtually unlimited Saudi Arabian petrodollars. As a locally based British diplomat said to me at the time, 'I don't think Massoud will be able to hold out much longer, unless he receives outside military support soon.' He did not receive it, yet he still managed to fight on.

EsHaq went on: 'Sayyaf always tried, maybe naively, to bring some Arabs to see what was going on, on this [Massoud's] side of the front line, so that they would not be used [manipulated] by the Taliban regime.'[9]

In retrospect, there were many warning signs about the two assassins. Dr

Abdullah said he saw a look of hatred flash across the face of one of the Arabs when he introduced himself to them. The Panjsheri driver who drove the two 'journalists' from Gulbahar up to the Panjsher told Afghan investigators that the two men kept asking him to drive carefully because their equipment was delicate, according to Amrullah Saleh.[10] Bismillah Khan noticed that the two men were clean-shaven, but the skin around their chins was pale, a sign that they normally wore full beards and had only recently shaved them off. It was something a radical Islamist or a member of the Taliban would do to pass as a Westerner. He noticed it, but did not think of its significance at the time.

About ten days after the arrival of the Arabs, the leaders of the Northern Alliance – or United Front, as it was also known, and of which Massoud was the military commander – were, by chance, holding a meeting at Sayyaf's office at the gorge. Rabbani, still internationally recognised as the president of Afghanistan, was there, as were the Shia leader Sayed Mustafa Kazemi; the Pashtun leader from eastern Afghanistan Haji Qadir; and Sayyaf. The Arab journalists interviewed them all and took a group photo of the leaders. Ahmad Jamshid, Massoud's cousin and personal secretary, was there. He recalled, 'They were always asking Sayyaf, "We would like to interview Massoud, where is Massoud, when can we see him?"'[11]

The leaders assembled for their meeting on the second floor of the building. Massoud arrived at the last minute and sat with them. The Arabs were staying on the floor below, but they never even saw Massoud. The meeting went on long into the night. When it finally broke up at 2 a.m., Sayyaf escorted Massoud out to his car. 'I don't know if they are journalists,' he told Massoud. 'Whatever they want, I don't know. They want to see you, and I don't think they are journalists. They are something different.'[12]

After several days with Sayyaf, the 'journalists' were brought up the valley to stay at Massoud's VIP guest house at Astana, halfway up the west bank of the river, opposite the helipad, where he put up important visitors such as CIA officials. It was there, in late August, that Matthew Leeming, a British traveller and writer, bumped into them. Leeming found them as taciturn and mysterious as everyone else who met them. But it was only after Massoud's death that he realised he had 'spent five days living with two of Osama bin Laden's kamikaze fighters', as he put it in an article entitled 'Breakfast with the Killers' in *The*

Spectator.[13]

Leeming described how they ate together in the panelled dining room of the guest house. There was a definite hierarchy between the two Arabs, he said:

> The first sat at the head of the table. He was large and dark, but his most curious feature [was] two blackened indentations on his forehead, which looked like the result of torture with cigarettes or an electric drill.[14]
>
> I asked him where he and his companion came from and he said Morocco, but they lived in Brussels. I tried to have a polite conversation about holiday destinations in Morocco, but he was unforthcoming … His companion said nothing, but ate his way through the rice and mutton with a hearty appetite.
>
> The next day the senior Moroccan saw me using a satellite telephone, and he became a good deal more amiable … He approached me, and asked if I had the name of the military commander of the Panjshir. I did, and volunteered the services of Qhudai [my interpreter] to help. 'We are doing a television documentary about Afghanistan, and we need to get on a helicopter to Khawja Bahauddin [Massoud's rear headquarters],' the Moroccan told me.
>
> The person to arrange this was the commander of the Panjshir, Bismillah Khan. As it happened, I had met him several days before and knew his telephone number. But he didn't answer.
>
> 'Do you have General Massoud's number?' asked the senior Moroccan. I was slightly staggered.
>
> 'No. I don't think he gives it out. You see, the Russians can find out where you are from a satellite phone and send a missile in to kill you. That was how they got Dudaev' [the Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudaev].' Qhudai looked slightly menacing.
>
> 'Why do you want to meet Commander Massoud?' I asked the Moroccans. I remember them exchanging glances.
>
> 'For our TV film,' he said.
>
> Afterwards Qhudai said to me, 'I think they are spies.'
>
> 'But everyone's a spy in Afghanistan,' I said. 'You're a spy.' (This was true, and was why I had employed him.)
>
> 'But they are Arab spies.'
>
> There is little love lost between Persian speakers and Arabs, so I put this down to racial prejudice.[15]

Massoud, normally unflappable, was worried by a recent development: the radio 'chatter' between the heads of the Taliban and the ISI, the Pakistani spy agency, which his intelligence was picking up. As his son, Ahmad, told me later, Massoud's intelligence had always been so good in the past that he had always known what his opponents were planning. Now, for the first time, his inability to get to the bottom of what his enemies were plotting worried him – by his own admission – at least to some extent.

Ahmad said he remembered his father was always saying, ‘There is something they talk about with each other, the head of the Taliban and the head of the ISI; they congratulate each other that success is going to happen one day, but they are not giving anything away to people at a lower level.’[16]

Ahmad told me, ‘My father actually had people [informers] inside the ISI and inside the Taliban regime, but they did not know either. My father was like, “I don’t know if it is an operation they are planning that I don’t know about. Are they going to attack Khoja Bahauddin [Massoud’s rear headquarters, in the north]? Are they going to attack from Kabul? Are they going to make an air strike from Pakistan?”

‘“What is it they are planning that I don’t get? Why are they congratulating each other?” my father used to say, and he was worried, he was a bit worried… He was like, “Something is happening I don’t know about,” and it was the first time that my father was actually confused about some plan they had, because he always knew beforehand what they were doing.

‘The Russians and the communist Afghan government, they knew every single place my father used to go, but they could not catch him. They could not bomb him. Why? Because he had very good intelligence inside the Russian [army], although the Russians did not want to admit it, and also inside the Afghan government’s KHAD [secret police].’[17]

Massoud asked one of his top generals, Bismillah Khan, about the threat several times.

‘Four months before Massoud was assassinated, he called me from Takhar,’ Bismillah Khan told me in an interview later.[18] ‘Massoud told me that he received information from among the Taliban and al-Qaeda that they had recently taken a decision against the Northern Alliance that would break Massoud’s people down. Massoud knew about this, but didn’t know what the decision was. Would it be through our commanders? But we had hundreds of commanders, and a few defecting to the Taliban wouldn’t have had that kind of effect on us. We thought even if the Taliban were to capture Shomali and Kapisa, we had other places where we could fight. We were always thinking about these reports and trying to figure out what the Taliban’s plan was. Two months before Massoud’s assassination, he came to the Panjsher, and he asked me to meet him there. I was then commander of the Shomali region. Massoud again mentioned

this information, that he was receiving numerous reports that the Taliban were planning something that would break down the whole Northern Alliance. Massoud asked me what I thought the decision was. We investigated our commanders, but never found any negative issue.

'Twenty days before he was killed, he called me. The information had developed: the Taliban [were] becoming happier and happier, the Taliban and al-Qaeda [were] increasingly talking between each other. Once again, he asked me what I thought. I thought about every possibility, but never Massoud's assassination.

'On the day of the assassination, the Taliban launched a huge offensive against my forces in Shomali. I called Massoud and asked him to come from Takhar to Parwan to have lunch with me. Massoud was supposed to come and eat with me after the interview. Between 12 noon and 1 p.m., I received a message that Massoud had died. When I heard he was dead, I knew that that was what the intelligence had been about.'

The Taliban were building up their forces all this time along the multiple front lines. 'Their troops were gathering and waiting for an attack,' Jamshid, Massoud's personal secretary recalled. 'They were waiting on the Takhar front line and the Shomali front line, lots of troops were massing, and they were all "in readiness", gathering, on alert for fighting.'

Massoud watched the build-up, mystified. 'They are waiting for something,' he told Jamshid. It was highly unusual; the Taliban had never done anything like that before. Thousands of Taliban troops were massing in central and northern Afghanistan, and to keep them on alert in their positions for days cost huge sums of money, Jamshid said. 'The preparation, the troops, the weapons, and everything was coming to our front lines north of Kabul and in Takhar province. The preparation seemed to be to attack,' Jamshid said. 'Commander was waiting: "When are they attacking? Why are they not attacking?"'[19]

Throughout the summer of 2001, Massoud had focused on the military threat to his forces. He was constantly on the move, flying by helicopter down to the Panjsher Valley to see his commanders, then back up to Khoja Bahauddin, his rear base on the border with Tajikistan, and then dropping back into Tajikistan for meetings with diplomats and allies from other fronts. He had persuaded Ismail Khan to rejoin the resistance in western Afghanistan around the city of

Herat, and General Abdul Rashid Dostum had gone back into northern Afghanistan to team up with Hazara and Jamiat fighters in Dar-e-Suf, but the various fronts were isolated, cut off from each other, and Dushanbe became a coordination base.

His main concern was to hold off the Taliban and build a united front against them across the north. Even though many thought his alliance could not hold on, Massoud was convinced that the Taliban were reaching the limit of their expansion in the north. The Taliban would jeer that Massoud only controlled a small percentage of territory, but Jamshid said Massoud never considered giving up.

'All the time, they were telling us, "You just have 5 per cent or 2 per cent,"' Jamshid recalled. 'They didn't like to say the real thing, that you cannot survive and you should give up your weapons. But Commander Massoud always said, "As long as I have land in Afghanistan the size of my *pukul*, I will stay in this country." It's a famous expression of his,' Jamshid added. 'He meant: '"If the territory I hold is only as big as my *pukul*, I will stay in that land and I will defend that land."'

If Massoud was worried about the Taliban advances, he took no extra measures for his personal security that summer. A young Panjsheri reporter, Fahim Dashty, followed Massoud closely in the last months of his life, recording many events and often sitting in on meetings and interviews with him. 'I remember, three or four days before 9 September, there was a meeting of commanders in Khoja Bahauddin under those big chinar trees,' he told me.[20] Massoud was asking his intelligence chief, Engineer Aref, about the build-up of Taliban forces. Aref answered that the Taliban were preparing an assault. But Massoud did not agree with him. '[Aref] said, "I think they are going to do something bigger. But what it is, I don't know."'

'Was he worried?' I asked Dashty.

'No, of course not. You knew him. Of course not.'

'For me, it is not difficult to understand,' Dashty said. Like all God-fearing Muslims, Massoud believed that the moment of one's death is preordained by God and that no one can change it. 'If he knew that this was going to happen to him, at that moment, and in that place, and still he went there and accepted it, for me it is not difficult to understand.'

Massoud brought his family from Tajikistan to the Panjsher Valley for the month of August, and found time to be with them. Looking back, they recalled that he seemed to sense that his end was approaching. One day, he showed his twelve-year-old son, Ahmad, a spur high above the Panjsher river in sight of their village, Jangalak, and said that was where he wanted to be buried.

His wife, Sediqa, told of the last morning he spent with the family, and his reluctant parting, in her book, *Pour l'amour de Massoud*.

'I've been listening to Ahmad recite his lessons,' Massoud told her, adding that he wasn't aware of how much progress he had made:

> Then our daughters came upstairs and he said how happy he was that our children were such good pupils. At that moment, I was the happiest woman and mother in the world.
>
> 'I must go now, Pari.' It was the last time I heard him use my first name. As always, I went to lean on the stair rail. As he went down the stairs, his eyes never left me. Then, as I always did, I ran along the terrace from our room to watch him leave. He went down the garden steps slowly, turning towards me on every step. Once more we said good-bye with our eyes. He went down the last steps backwards, and jokingly, I made a sign saying 'Watch where you're going, you will fall!' He replied with a wave meaning: 'Don't worry!' He kept looking at me until the last step, and I was laughing, thinking of the mujahideen who down below, would only have seen his back.
>
> A long time after he was gone I was still smiling.[21]

Massoud kept up his fast pace through late August. He had agreed to meet the Arab 'journalists' in the Panjsher but, as he was leaving the valley again, he suggested the Arabs fly with him to Khoja Bahauddin. They were too slow gathering their things, however, and Massoud left without them.

'They took a long time with their luggage and missed the helicopter flight,' Amrullah Saleh said in a statement. 'It is my belief that they were trying to change the bomb. They therefore flew with French journalists two days later.'[22]

Françoise Causse, a French reporter, was on that helicopter flight with them to Khoja Bahauddin on 1 September, and she took a photograph of the 'cameraman' covering his face with his hand. She was suspicious of the men, and later gave an account of how she grilled the senior of them, Dahmane. He said that he worked for an information agency of the Arab world specialising in questions of human rights. She then quizzed him: '"Based where? – In London" was the reply, quickly adding: "But independent of governments and states." I retorted drily that independence is all very well but expensive. "Who finances

you?" I asked harshly. "I don't know, I am a simple journalist. I don't have access to this type of information. Those things are kept secret," he replied.'[23]

Causse said Dahmane spoke perfect French 'without accent': 'I am Parisian. When I say without accent I mean without any accent, Belgian, English, south-west France or elsewhere. He spoke "Parisian" if one can say that.' Dahmane had a soft, calm voice, she said. The other one contented himself by nodding his head.[24]

Causse was travelling with Shoukria Haider, a French-Afghan university professor and the president of Negar ('care'), an association for Afghan women. Haider told me that when she climbed into the helicopter, she saw the two men being searched assiduously by three Panjsheri security officials:

> [The Panjsheri officials] were dressed in military uniforms and were security guards. One of them was extremely angry, so angry that he was calling them all kinds of names and insults. He was saying, 'Who let these men into this helicopter and why?' He ordered two colleagues to search the assassins' bags. They searched their belongings, and they did so minutely, looking through all their things, their clothes, everything. They said: 'There is nothing.' He ordered them to look again. So they searched them and their bags a second time. But they found nothing. The whole time the Arabs said nothing.[25]

Haider immediately recognised the two men as North African, and warned Asim Suhail, the head of the foreign relations office in Khoja Bahauddin, that they were neither Arabs nor journalists and they should not be trusted. Suhail, she said, was extremely worked up about their presence. 'He kept asking, "Why the hell have they sent me these two? What are these two Arabs doing here? They have Taliban visas."'[26]

Sand and dust storms had made helicopter access to Massoud's rear headquarters in Khoja Bahauddin impossible for days. The group of journalists waiting to interview him included Edward Girardet, correspondent for the American publication *The Christian Science Monitor*. When Girardet arrived at Khoja Bahauddin to interview Massoud, he said he found two unusual characters, a pair of Arabs, who said they were a television team and were also waiting to interview Massoud. Girardet said he tried talking to the 'taciturn Arabs' whenever he saw them, but they kept to themselves. They left the compound every morning, their vehicle loaded with equipment, apparently to film or to shoot footage in and around Khoja Bahauddin.

Girardet said that when he asked the ‘severe one’ how the filming was going, his responses were always ‘unenthusiastic’: “‘Good, I suppose,” he said glumly. Neither of them appeared particularly energetic about their work.’ He said he assumed they were dejected by the endless wait for Massoud. Next day, Girardet said he saw them standing outside their room, and invited them to join him for tea. ‘The older one declined politely. “Merci, you are very kind but we have things to do.”’[27]

Later, Girardet said, he stopped by the office of Asim Suhail, who managed the guest house and was an intelligence officer with the foreign ministry, to ask about the Arabs and find out which television network they worked for. Reaching into his desk, Suhail pulled out a photocopied document, a letter of recommendation in English from the London-based Islamic Observation Centre, signed by its director Yasser al-Siri. ‘It vouched for the [false identities of the] two men, Karim Touzani and Kassim Bakkali, as journalists for Arabic News International. I had never heard of the agency,’ Girardet wrote later – because it didn’t exist, of course. ‘They wished to interview Massoud,’ Suhail told Girardet. ‘In fact they have been trying for weeks to get an interview. They were in the Panjsher before. I have told them to wait until Massoud comes. They are only Arabs, not very important. The commander will decide. He is very busy.’[28]

A few days later, when Girardet and a number of other journalists had decided against waiting any longer and were about to leave, Girardet saw the older Arab emerging from the bathhouse, a towel draped over his head to protect him from the sand. Girardet walked over to say goodbye, and asked the man, ‘Will you try and go? This dust could persist for days.’

The Arab shook his head. ‘No, we’ll wait for Massoud.’

It was not until a month after Massoud’s assassination on 9 September 2001 that I arrived in the Panjsher Valley to make a retrospective programme about him for ITV’s *Tonight with Trevor McDonald*. I found a number of friends and acquaintances, including some members of Massoud’s own family, feeling puzzled by and unhappy about the comparative ease with which the two Arabs had apparently been able to gain access to the Panjsher, and to Massoud himself.

Noor Akbari was a fellow villager of Massoud’s, although not one of his fans in the early days.[29] Akbari told me over lunch in his house that the Arabs were loaded with dollars and were ‘bribing’ people they thought might help them.

The failure of Massoud's security staff to thoroughly search the two Arabs reminded me of an occasion when Trevor McDonald, my colleague at *News at Ten*, flew to Baghdad with an ITN crew to interview President Saddam Hussein. McDonald told me afterwards that the search of his crew's camera equipment by the security men protecting the Iraqi dictator was so painstakingly thorough that they almost took the camera to pieces. They also removed McDonald's ring and watch in preparation for the interview and, at the last moment, substituted a brand-new exact replica of the ITN camera for the actual interview.

Massoud's security was 'atrocious' when it came to the media, Girardet later wrote.[30] Neither Massoud nor his staff, Girardet claimed, were ever suspicious of any journalist – a reflection, one feels, of Massoud's own insouciance, or carelessness, in the face of danger. One of his commanders, Muslem, for example, recalled how, when they were advancing across ground that might well have been mined, Massoud would walk boldly ahead, not keeping to the path and apparently oblivious to any danger. He showed no fear. He was immortal – that was the message, to give an example to his troops.

Massoud's carelessness – or was it his impatience with the restrictions of security? – may well have influenced his staff, including his intelligence chief, Engineer Aref Sarwari, who later became governor of the Panjsher. Incredible as it may seem, Aref (as he is always known) did not know the two Arabs had arrived in the Panjsher until almost literally the last minute. 'It was just seven or eight minutes before the explosion,' Aref said in a statement afterwards, 'that I met the two terrorists for the first time.'[31] This seems hard to believe, since the two Arabs had been in the Panjsher, trying to arrange an interview with Massoud, for at least a fortnight. One would have thought that any security chief worth his salt would have wanted to inspect these Arabs for himself, given the fact that they were travelling on visas issued by the Pakistan High Commission in London and the Taliban Embassy in Islamabad, instead of, for example, the friendly neighbour state of Tajikistan, with its capital Dushanbe being a place where Massoud was seen as an honoured guest and where he had a house.

Aref told Scotland Yard, when they investigated the assassination at the request of Massoud's youngest brother, Ahmad Wali Massoud – then the Afghan ambassador in London – that he was with Massoud and Masood Khalili on the fatal Sunday, 9 September, when Massoud said to him there were two Arab

journalists waiting next door to interview him. ‘This was the first time I had heard about the two Arab journalists,’ Aref said. ‘I would just like to mention that Mr Asim Suhail, who was the representative of Dr Abdullah, had a duty to report to Dr Abdullah directly. Mr Asim Suhail also had the responsibility for looking after all foreign guests.’ Aref added that Massoud decided whom he wanted to see each day.[32]

He did not mention – he may not have known – that the two Arab pseudo-journalists were handing out large sums of money to all and sundry including by one account us$10,000 to Asim, the gatekeeper. Asadullah Khaled, a former head of Afghan intelligence, who said he was at school with Asim, told me that.

Leeming’s view of Massoud’s attitude to security differs to that held by Girardet. ‘While Massoud’s security was tight in many ways,’ Leeming wrote, ‘he was always prepared to see journalists. He was a charming, well-educated product of a French lycée, the Esteqlal, in Kabul, and journalists were always happy to see him. Access was controlled by a sidekick in charge of Massoud’s security. Engineer Asim let the Moroccans into Massoud’s room despite the fact that their Pakistani visas were invalid.’ In a recent update to his article, Leeming added, ‘Asim had rung Massoud’s brother when I arrived to check that I was who I claimed to be. Why he did not do something similar in this case is a mystery that still perplexes me twenty years later.’[33]

But if Asim was influenced by the money, he was not a traitor, his former classmate Khaled told me. ‘First of all, his father was a mullah, and he had sympathy for Arabs,’ Khaled said. ‘Secondly, they gave him $10,000 at that time. [It was] a lot for those times; it’s like $100,000 today.’ The Arabs gave the money in the form of zakat, or alms. ‘They told him, “Because we are friends, and you are a good person, and we are rich – this is my zakat, and you can build a house for yourself.” Asim and others, they then pushed [on] Massoud that “these are good people, they are Arabs, you should do an interview with them, it will be a good message to the Arab world”.’[34]

The Arabs ‘used all the tricks they could,’ Khaled added. As for Asim, ‘He was a poor guy, and this is what I heard from his friends: that he took the money. It does not mean that he cheated Massoud, or that he knew these Arabs were assassins; he was cheated by the Arabs himself.’[35]

Those who knew Massoud best said that, although he had caught many

would-be assassins in the past, he did not spot the threat the Arabs posed. ‘We almost had a blind spot for journalists,’ Khalili told Scotland Yard. ‘Especially as in the last twenty-three years we [had] no suspicions of journalists whether Arab or non-Arab.’[36]

The Afghan reporter Dashty looked at Massoud’s face seconds before the bomb exploded, and said he showed no sign of suspicion. The Afghans had barely known the phenomenon of suicide bombing in Afghanistan in 2001, many pointed out. There had been a suicide attack on a jihadi leader in Kunar in the 1980s by an Egyptian, but otherwise such attacks were unknown.[37]

‘We were preparing for somebody to put a mine under the chair or do some gun or sniper attack,’ Jamshid told me. ‘We were prepared for all of those things, but we weren’t prepared for somebody to assassinate themselves; this was the first time in Afghanistan.’[38]

Even with the best of security, they did not have experience of such an attack, his son Ahmad told me. ‘He was the first political figure to be killed by a suicide bomber … the first suicide bombing in Afghanistan. No one even thought about something like that … We didn’t even know that someone could come with equipment which would blow up himself to kill you … I wouldn’t say [it was a] lack of security, it was just that, sometimes, some plans are just too perfect.’[39]

24

The Eve of Assassination

Masood Khalili, one of Massoud's oldest friends, was serving as the Afghan ambassador to India in 2001. Four days before the assassination, on 5 September, he left India to fly to Kazakhstan for a meeting with the Kazakh foreign minister.

'Commander' – as Khalili always called Massoud, dropping the definite article – rang him and suggested that, after his meeting in Alma Ata, they should meet. He did not give a reason, and Khalili thought that perhaps he had 'something important to tell me', as he said to Scotland Yard. So, on 7 September, Khalili flew to Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan.

Of all Massoud's close associates and contemporaries, Khalili was – perhaps with the exception of Dr Abdullah, his interpreter and political adviser – his only intellectual equal and certainly his soulmate. The bond was deepened by the fact that Khalili's father, Khalilullah Khalili, was the outstanding poet of his generation writing in Persian. The former king, Zahir Shah, a great friend and admirer of the senior Khalili, built a house for him not far from the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul, which his son, Masood, still uses.

I met Khalilullah, a small buoyant figure with twinkling eyes, only once, on a summer's day in England in the 1980s. He came to our cottage in Kent for lunch one summer with some Afghan friends, the Gailanis. Mrs Gailani, a great beauty in her day and a member of the royal family, was the link, I imagined. After lunch, they sat and talked in the garden, embowered in the scent of roses, in particular a purple William Lobb, while I listened uncomprehendingly to their animated conversation in Persian. They all hung on Khalilullah's words and

laughed at his stories: he was clearly a mesmerising conversationalist. Eventually, in the knowledge that my guests were happy, I slipped off inside to watch the final stages of the men's singles at Wimbledon in which the ice-cool Björn Borg was playing his bad-boy rival, John McEnroe. It was a halcyon day that I will never forget.

Landing in Dushanbe that fateful September, Khalili booked into a five-star hotel and sent a message to 'Commander' that he had arrived. He then went out to dinner with two of Massoud's closest aides based in Dushanbe: Amrullah Saleh, a young intelligence officer, and General Saleh Registani, a senior military commander. Throughout much of the period of his struggle against the Taliban – from 1996 until his death in 2001 – the Tajikistan government gave Massoud, a fellow Tajik, valuable support, allowing him to reside in the capital and use the facilities of its airbase at Kulab, southwest of Dushanbe.

After dinner, Khalili went back to his hotel and was about to go to bed, when Amrullah Saleh telephoned to tell him Massoud had arrived from Afghanistan and wanted to see him straightaway. Khalili got dressed again and was picked up by Massoud's nephew and military attaché, Wadud, and driven in Massoud's black bulletproof Mercedes to his house, which he also used as an unofficial headquarters where he could meet and entertain foreign visitors.

Khalili, who had not seen Massoud for four months, found him in his room, alone, wearing Afghan dress. He did not have his customary *pukul* on, but looked, Khalili said later, 'very handsome'. Khalili recalled:

> Massoud asked about the world and Kazakhstan, and asked what happened with my meeting with the foreign minister. I said he was young and good, but I argued with him because he was not serious about terrorism: there were Muslims in the country and they were vulnerable. However, I said he was a fine man. We talked further about terrorism in Kashmir and India. I left his residence at about 12:30 a.m. and returned to my hotel. [Massoud] came out to say goodbye, which was unusual. I was informed that we would travel to Afghanistan the next day between 10 and 11 a.m.[1]

Khalili said he woke early the next day, had some tea, and rang his wife. She told him to go and see Massoud so that he would be home that much sooner. After breakfast, Wadud picked him up again in the Mercedes:

> [Massoud] was waiting, and I asked, 'You need me urgently? Is there anything important?' He said, 'No, I just want you to be with me.' So, we went to the airport. Engineer Kameel was there and about

four or five others. Wadud stayed behind. Jamshid, Massoud's bodyguard-cum-secretary, and a relative, who [was] about twenty-four or twenty-five, was also there. The flight took about forty minutes. I took pictures of Commander … We landed at Khoja Bahauddin – my first trip to the area – and went to a house, where the bombing took place, to have lunch. Engineer Aref was there. He is the head of intelligence and one of [Massoud]'s number ones. He will know a lot about things to do with Commander. The house belonged to another mujahideen commander and had been given to Commander Massoud. He used it for VIP guests. We went to the room where the bombing took place, and talked. It was about 9 × 7 m. We talked about Hindus and temples. Commander was more interested than normal [in] such matters.[2]

This atypical interest and some unusual remarks by Massoud – for example, when Khalili asked if Massoud needed him 'urgently' and if there was 'anything important', and Massoud replied, 'No, I just want you to be with me' – make one wonder if Massoud was indeed worried by the radio chatter that his intelligence was picking up between the heads of the Taliban and the ISI as they congratulated each other about some event.

Khalili's account to Scotland Yard reads, 'At about 5 p.m. we went in [Massoud]'s Land Cruiser to another building, in which [Massoud] had a bedroom. This building was his headquarters. He had a Holy Koran in the room. He had a tactical meeting with other commanders and I went with Aref to the Amu Darya [the nearby river].'[3]

Massoud's meeting on that last afternoon in Khoja Bahauddin was quite tense. There were around fifteen to twenty commanders and operations men, Jamshid recalled. 'They were all from that area, not just from Khoja Bahauddin, but from all around Takhar and the northern provinces, especially lots were from Khoja Ghar and from Khoja Bahauddin.'[4] Massoud was angry that they had lost a newly gained position in Khoja Ghar, near the ancient Greek city of Ai Khanum. Massoud's troops had seized the position just a few days earlier, but then Massoud had left for Tajikistan and the Taliban had mounted a counter-attack and had taken back the post. Massoud's men had not even managed to take the tanks positioned there and other weaponry with them when they fled. He was 'very upset', Jamshid said, and typically he was already making plans to seize the position again. 'He wanted to take it back,' Jamshid said. 'He always wanted to keep the enemy busy, because he knew their power, he knew their money, he knew their supporters, he knew everything, so he wanted to keep them very

busy.’[5]

The meeting went on for nearly three hours, until early evening. They usually ate together, but Jamshid held back that evening because there were visitors – Khalili and some important Jamiat commanders: Qari Baba, a famous commander from Ghazni who had travelled from Pakistan to see Massoud, and another commander from Herat.

During the evening, Asim, the foreign ministry protocol officer, came to ask Massoud if he would see the Arab ‘journalists’. It was nearly a month since they had first entered Northern Alliance territory, and they had been waiting nine days in Khoja Bahauddin since missing the helicopter ride with Massoud from the Panjsher. Over the last few days, they had grown particularly anxious, nagging Asim to arrange the interview and warning that they had to leave imminently. Now that Massoud had arrived in Khoja Bahauddin, they pressed Asim so much that he approached Massoud three times during the evening on their behalf.

‘In the end, Commander was upset with him,’ Jamshid recalled. ‘“Man, leave us, maybe I will see them tomorrow,” he told Asim. “There’s war everywhere, and you see I’m very busy.”’[6]

Dropping with tiredness, Jamshid went to bed at midnight. There was fighting north of Kabul, and he wanted to catch some sleep while he could. ‘I knew the Taliban were attacking,’ Jamshid recalled. ‘I went to bed for just two or three hours, and then they woke me again.’[7] The Taliban made coordinated attacks at five points across the Shomali Plain, and Jamshid took calls through the night as commanders reported on the fighting.

Massoud stayed up with Khalili, reading poetry. ‘Massoud at dinner was very happy, because he had found Masood Khalili and always liked to find time to read poetry with him,’ Jamshid said. ‘That night, they were awake until 1 or 1:30 a.m.’[8]

The two read from the works of the famous fourteenth-century Persian lyric poet Hafez, using a new edition that Massoud had just received from Tehran.[9] They often read poetry together, their custom being to flip through the pages and read from whichever poem they chanced to come across; from that poem, it was believed, the reader would receive a message. They also, as was their practice, debated the meaning of each poem. Khalili came to the conclusion that the prevailing message was an unusual and disturbing one of ‘imminent death’ –

which was unusual, because Hafez was best known for his lyric poems about love and wine. One poem, in particular, stood out:

> Last night before the dawn, they released me from sorrow.
> And in that darkness of the night, they gave me the water of eternal light.[10]

Khalili turned the pages and read another:

> Appreciate the company in the night because after our days,
> The celestial sphere will make infinite circuits
> And many days and nights will come.
>
> You must value this night sitting and talking
> Because in the days to come this night will not be repeated.[11]

They turned in late, and Massoud asked Khalili to stay in Khoja Bahauddin for a second reading after lunch the next day.

When Massoud came by the next morning, his plans had already changed three times. As the Taliban attacks raged overnight on the Shomali Plain, he had ordered his helicopter to be readied first thing to fly down to Charikar to confer with Bismillah Khan, the commander there. But news came that the fighting had eased, and Massoud decided instead to drive out to inspect the front lines near Khoja Bahauddin. On his way, he drove past the guest house where Khalili was, and where the Arab 'journalists' were also staying, and suddenly Massoud changed plans again. 'He didn't want to do the interview,' said Jamshid, but suddenly he decided to get it over and done with.[12] He ordered Jamshid to tell the bodyguards, who usually accompanied him to the front lines, to go back to headquarters, and he entered the guest house to find Khalili. Massoud's intelligence chief, Engineer Aref, had been briefing Khalili, but the two broke off their conversation when Massoud arrived.

Khalili's version in his statement to Scotland Yard states that Massoud arrived in his room at about 11 or 11:30 a.m.:

> I believe he was wearing a khaki shirt and a long thin military-style jacket with polished boots … He told me to put my passport in my pocket or I may lose it … He said there are two Arab journalists who have been waiting two weeks, I think, to see me. He said we should speak to them and [then] go to the river [the Amu Darya]. This was the first I had heard of the Arabs apart from a passing comment the night before. Here a comment had been made by Engineer [Asim, the protocol officer]

as to what should happen to the Arabs, [Massoud] said [to] leave them. I was going to have a shower but [Massoud] said it would only be about 5/10 minutes. [Massoud] mentioned his back was troubling him.

We went to the same room we had talked in the day before. I sat beside [Massoud], on his right. His shoulder was touching mine. [Asim] was sitting to my right. Two people followed [Aref and Jamshid]. I didn't see [Fahim Dashty] enter but I saw him in the room with his small camera. The first male, the interviewer, looked a bit flashy, not very tall and very pale-skinned. I think he had blue/brown eyes. He was handsome, in his late 20s. He seemed very calm. The other, the cameraman, looked Mongolian. He was bigger, stronger and taller, he had a flat nose. He had a more alert feel [about] him.

He sat on the ground with his camera. [Massoud] was very hospitable, apologising for delaying them. The interviewer had a case and showed a letter to [Massoud]. I did not really see it. It was a list of questions I believe. The interviewer said, 'My English is not good, can you speak French? The reply was 'No.' I spoke English with the interviewer and translated to [Massoud]. His English was very weak and slow. I said to the interviewer, 'Which paper do you represent?' He said, 'I don't belong to any paper' but that he belonged to Islamic Centres in Europe, London and all over. I said to [Massoud], 'He is not a journalist.' [Massoud] said 'Let him finish.' He sent me signals by nudging me.

[Massoud] asked about the areas under the control of the Taliban, in Dari. I translated. The interviewer's reply was, 'They criticise you and you criticise them.' The interviewer said, 'We belong to Islamic Centre and we want to find the problem [*sic*] of the Muslim people in the world.' He was trying to attract the attention of [Massoud].

[Massoud] said, 'How many questions have they got?' I immediately translated this. I was surprised they were not journalists and think they must have lied to someone as we have never suspected journalists for 20 years. The interviewer took one page from his papers and started reading the questions. [Massoud] wanted to see them before they started filming. He read the questions very calmly and did not look scared. There were 15 questions in all and about 8 or 9 related to Osama bin Laden. I told this to [Massoud]; he didn't pay any attention because he knew how to answer these questions. I translated all the questions and [Massoud] said, 'Tell the camera to start.' These questions made me nervous:

1. If you take Kabul, what do you do with Osama?
2. If you capture Osama, what do you do?
3. Why did you say Osama was a bad Muslim in France?
4. Why do you say there is a difference between Moderate and Fundamentalist Islam?
5. Why don't you consider him a leader?

The tone was different. I said to the cameraman to start. The cameraman pulled the table away very harshly; I said he looked like a [wrestler] more than a cameraman. [Massoud] laughed very loudly. The cameraman put the tripod on the smallest size [at its lowest, presumably]. He then put the camera on the tripod. I remember thinking it was too close. It was about half a metre away. He would not be able to film. [Massoud] said, 'Tell him to ask the question.' I think I noticed [Dashty] again taking film with a small camera. He was far from us. The pale man started asking questions.

The first question was, 'What is the situation in Afghanistan?' I had translated 'What' when the

> blast happened. I did not hear the blast but I totally remember seeing a dark blue fire rushing towards me. It was from in between the cameraman and the interviewer. I was very conscious at that moment and said to myself, 'This is the last moment'. I remember thinking I was going to die. The smell, sound and smoke were over me and in my mouth all mixed up. I was saying 'God is Holy, God is One'. I then felt a hand on my chest; it was very weak. I'm sure this must have been the hand of [Massoud]. I then became unconscious.[13]

The explosion shook the whole house. It was so loud that both Aref and Jamshid, who were one floor down, on the ground floor, thought it was a Taliban air raid. As guards rushed into a scene of carnage, Massoud told them to look for Khalili first. Then Aref ran upstairs and saw two guards and a driver carrying Massoud down to a waiting car, which took him to the heliport. Massoud was 'bleeding from all over the front of his body,' Aref stated. 'I even noticed that a small piece of the ring finger on his right hand was missing.'[14] A helicopter had by chance just arrived, so Aref ordered it to stand by to take Massoud and the other wounded to the nearest clinic, in a small town across the border in Tajikistan called Farkhar, ironically with the same name as the scene of one of Massoud's most striking victories. Khalili came round during the flight:

> I was then aware that I was in a helicopter. I opened my eyes for about 10–15 seconds. I saw [Massoud] with blood on his face and in his hair. I said, 'We are both going to die.' I then became unconscious again. I did not become fully conscious until 8 days later in Germany … I was told [that] in the room after the bomb [Massoud was] saying, 'Help Khalili first.' My wife told me in Germany that [Massoud] had died.[15]

As she went through his belongings in the hospital, Khalili's wife found the passport that, on Massoud's urging, he had put in his breast pocket just before the interview. 'My wife opened my passport and there was shrapnel stuck in the 15th page; this saved my life.'[16]

Shortly after Massoud's arrival at the small clinic in Farkhar, an Indian doctor declared him dead. His guards, who had carried him to the car and into the helicopter, said later that he survived only a few minutes after the blast.

One of the shining lights of Afghanistan – and of the world – was thus extinguished in a cruel and senseless murder that impoverished not only his large and loving family, and Afghanistan itself, but the whole of the civilised world.

25

A Final Encounter

In the hours after Massoud's death, two crucial decisions were taken by his successors. The first was to claim that he was still alive; the second was to appoint a successor.

By claiming he was still alive, Massoud's supporters hoped to forestall any Taliban attempt to launch an immediate military and political takeover bid. In that objective, they were successful, largely due to the fact that 9/11 – the al-Qaeda attack on the Twin Towers in New York and on the Pentagon near Washington DC – took place only two days later, leaving nearly 3,000 dead. The question of how the United States, with its huge military might, would react, must have preoccupied the Taliban.

At the same time as the dead or dying Massoud was being flown to Tajikistan, the Northern Alliance moved to appoint a successor.

Jamshid, Massoud's private secretary, telephoned Rabbani, still the nominal head of the Afghan government, at his home 100 miles away in Badakhshan. He told him the worst: that Massoud had been blown up by Arab assassins, was badly hurt, was unconscious, and was probably dying, if not already dead, as the helicopter with his body on board took off for Tajikistan. Rabbani did not take long to make his decision. Mohammad Fahim, a strongly built, tough-looking Panjsheri and Massoud's military deputy, was the obvious choice.

The decision seems to have been predominantly Rabbani's. A professor of theology, donnish, diminutive, manipulative, with a passion for power, Rabbani was the political boss. As president of Jamiat-i-Islami, Afghanistan's largest and most moderate political party, he was the beneficiary of Massoud's military

prowess and success. Fahim had already advised Rabbani that, to fool the Taliban, they should cover up Massoud's death; pretend he was still alive, although injured; and announce that he had been taken to hospital in Tajikistan. Rabbani agreed. Conscious that quick decisions were needed, especially if Massoud were dying or dead, Rabbani decided that Fahim should be made Massoud's successor, but that the appointment should not be announced until several days later.

Two days later, on 11 September, al-Qaeda carried out its suicide attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It was the most shocking onslaught on the United States since the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor, sixty years before.[1]

Massoud's assassination came forty-eight hours before 9/11, and it was overshadowed by the later and larger disaster. The precise timing was largely chance, since the al-Qaeda assassins had been waiting for their 'interview' with the legendary Afghan guerrilla commander for weeks. But for those who knew Massoud, the news was shattering.

Peter Tomsen, who served as United States special envoy to Afghanistan from 1989 to 1992, was in Rome, working on a peace plan for the country, when he heard the news. 'I felt shock, sadness, and anger all at once,' he wrote. 'Massoud was unique, one of the most remarkable of the many leaders I had met during my thirty-two-year career in the State Department. The Soviets and Pakistanis had tried many times to assassinate him. Osama bin Laden's cunning exceeded theirs – his deceit and wickedness had no bounds.'[2]

The only formal investigation into the assassination was conducted by Scotland Yard at the request of Massoud's younger brother, Ahmad Wali Massoud, who was then Afghan ambassador in London.

The Arab assassins had placed the camera right in front of Massoud, but the bomb was actually concealed in a battery belt worn by the 'interviewer', the elder of the two assassins. When it exploded, Massoud received the full force of the blast. Masood Khalili, slightly to one side, was badly injured, and was unconscious for several days – but, although he lost the sight in one eye and the use of one ear, he made an almost miraculous recovery. He described to me later how the explosion was like 'a huge wind sweeping all before it and bearing him into oblivion'.[3] He remained conscious enough only to reach out and touch Massoud lying beside him, bloodied and terribly wounded, but whether dead or

alive he could not tell, before he drifted off into a coma. Khalili was transferred to Germany and underwent multiple operations. In his statement to the Scotland Yard investigators, he said:

> The injuries I suffered as a result of the bomb are as follows: third- to fourth-degree burns on the outside of my right leg. I also have a lot of shrapnel in this leg. In my left leg I have about three to four hundred pieces of shrapnel. It is from the ankle to above the knee, some of it is around the nerves in my ankle and causes me great pain. In my right arm there is shrapnel, and in the right-hand side of my neck and face. Further to this I have shrapnel on the right-hand side of my back. My right eye has lost 90 per cent of vision, again from the blast. My right ear has lost 60 per cent of hearing and is also burnt. Both my hands have shrapnel in them and are burnt. I have a broken finger in my right hand. I also have double vision.
>
> I have been confined to a wheelchair since the attack. However, now I walk about ten to fifteen minutes a day with a walking stick. Things should improve. Every night I take medication for the pain and during the day I take three more doses of painkiller. I can feel every piece of shrapnel in my body and I am in great discomfort. Since the attack I have lost my temper. My patience is very short.[4]

Lying in his hospital bed, Khalili pondered who could have been behind the attack:

> Commander Massoud was my close friend. He was a brave, honest and patriotic person. He is the only one that has always resisted the enemies of Afghanistan. Everybody relied upon him. He was the one who would make a stand. When he made a trip to Europe in May 2001, I was with him. He spoke in France and the European Parliament. He also gave news conferences. His message was that he was fighting against [the] terrorism that was a threat to his country and also the world. He spoke about Osama bin Laden saying that he was a terrorist. He asked for help to fight against Osama's terrorists, Arabs and non-Arabs alike.
>
> In his speech at the Parliament of France he spoke about the coalition of terrorists, Osama and the Arabs, extreme Pakistanis and non-Arab extremists across the world. He said they were helped and encouraged by Pakistan's ISI. [Massoud] was a very practical and objective man. When I was in my hospital bed in Germany, Braunschweig Hospital, Braun-schweig, Hanover, I thought very carefully about who would be behind this attack because I did not want to blame someone else. I realise what I say is conjecture based on circumstantial evidence: I believe Osama bin Laden and the Pakistani ISI were behind the murder. This originated from Massoud's trip to France in May 2001.
>
> Commander Massoud was very eloquent in his attack on Osama. They also saw journalists around him. They would have realised this was a good cover. Osama bin Laden wanted to create a religious depth within Afghanistan as well as Central Asia and could not do this without removing Massoud. The ISI wanted strategic depth in Central Asia and again Massoud stood in their way. Osama also knew he would do something in New York [the 9/11 attacks] and would need protection. The murder of Commander Massoud would be a gift to Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader and the Pakistani ISI. Why Arabs? No Afghan would do this.

Pakistanis would be suspected as would Russians.[5]

Were the heads of the ISI privy to the plot? I asked a former Afghan intelligence chief if he thought the organisation was ‘deeply involved’. ‘I am 100 per cent sure,’ he replied. ‘Without the ISI, it couldn’t have happened. And this is my question: if they weren’t involved, why did they stop Scotland Yard’s investigation?’[6]

What Khalili worked out from his hospital bed, investigators pieced together over the months and years after September 2001.

The telephone number of Abu Hani, the Arab fighter who had telephoned Sayyaf to introduce the two Arab ‘journalists’, was found among documents the assassin Ouaer was carrying. American agents traced the satellite telephone calls. It turned out Abu Hani had not been calling from Bosnia, as he had claimed at the time, but from Kandahar, the Taliban seat of power, where Osama bin Laden maintained a large training base. It was there that the 9/11 plot was hatched, and where Abu Hani helped plan Massoud’s assassination. Abu Hani was one of the founders of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the first Sunni group to use suicide bombers in terror attacks, and had set up dozens of al-Qaeda training camps and trained thousands of fighters over the years, according to the United States Department of Defense. He had not been living quietly in Bosnia but had been busy fighting and propagating jihad in Bosnia, as well as in Chechnya, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Somalia – he was in Somalia in 1993, when eighteen American soldiers were killed in Mogadishu, in events that featured in the film *Black Hawk Down* – and was prized by al-Qaeda as a good strategist. After Osama bin Laden moved back to Afghanistan in 1996, Abu Hani was persuaded to move from Bosnia to join him in Kandahar.[7]

Waheed Mozhdah, an Afghan who served in the Taliban Foreign Ministry and sometimes interpreted at high-level meetings between the Taliban leadership and bin Laden, later confirmed that the two assassins had held meetings in Kandahar with al-Qaeda officials. It was there that they collected the video camera, which arrived in a consignment of office supplies driven in from the Pakistani city of Quetta for them.[8] In an article posted on his Facebook page, Mozhdah pieced together events that he and others had witnessed in Kandahar but only fully understood after Massoud’s assassination. One of the people working at al-

Qaeda's cultural office saw Abu Hani and the 'journalists' unpack the camera and was surprised there was such a fuss over a battered second-hand camera. When the two 'journalists' were departing from Kandahar's airport to fly to Kabul, all the top al-Qaeda leaders, including bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, assembled at their hotel to see them off.[9] 'Why were these two journalists so important?' Mozhdah wondered.

It was to take the Americans even longer to catch Abu Hani than it did for them to hunt down al-Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, who was killed in an American raid on his home in Abbottabad, Pakistan in 2011. After the 9/11 attacks, Abu Hani made his way to Malaysia. In 2005, he was arrested there and extradited to his native Egypt, where he was imprisoned for six years under President Hosni Mubarak. Afghan officials were preparing to travel to Egypt to interview him about Massoud's assassination when the Arab Spring uprising deposed Mubarak. Thousands of prisoners were released from Egypt's prisons, including Abu Hani, who disappeared. He made his way to Syria as the popular uprising there turned into an armed struggle. He became a prominent leader of the group Ahrar al-Sham, which fought against the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad and was closely linked to the al-Qaeda branch in Syria. As in Afghanistan, the Arab jihadis introduced suicide bombing and an extremist agenda that did great damage to the cause of the Syrian revolution. Abu Hani was fully involved. He was killed in a United States drone strike in Idlib province in north-western Syria in February 2017.

Massoud's brother, Ahmad Wali, asked the British to help investigate his brother's assassination – not least because Yasser al-Siri, who had signed the letter of introduction for the two Arabs, was living in London. Al-Siri, a friend of the former deputy and current leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, a fellow Egyptian, was well known by the British authorities. He had arrived in Britain in 1994 after being sentenced to death in absentia in Egypt, where he had been charged with the attempted murder of a former Egyptian prime minister. Having escaped from Egypt, he made his way to Britain, where he asked for, and was granted, political asylum. Britain also refused an Egyptian request for his extradition, on the grounds that Britain had abolished the death penalty.

After Massoud's assassination, the British – Tony Blair was then prime minister – tasked Scotland Yard with investigating the circumstances of

Massoud's death. A team travelled to Kabul, where it took statements and collected photographs of the evidence. But the investigation had not got very far when, Ahmad Wali told me, the government of a third country – unnamed at the time – asked the British to drop the inquiry. Pakistan was the unnamed country. As patrons of the Taliban, and before that of the fundamentalist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – and, as it turned out later, secret hosts for seven or eight years of the head of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden himself – Pakistan and its all-powerful ISI were dyed-in-the-wool opponents of Massoud. Pakistan's president, Musharraf, had asked Britain to drop the investigation, and it did, leaving it inconclusive.[10] Although he had been arrested by Scotland Yard as a result of Massoud's assassination, al-Siri was eventually released.

Massoud's death must have occurred more or less as they carried him out and placed him in the helicopter that was to take him on the short flight across the river to the hospital in neighbouring Tajikistan. Indeed, Aref told Scotland Yard that one of the guards said in the car that Massoud had passed away, and that, at the time, he had insisted the guard was wrong. The cover-up of Massoud's death seems to have been remarkably successful. Even his younger brother, Ahmad Wali, was fed the bogus story; when I spoke to him on the telephone soon after the news broke, he apparently believed the official story that his brother was injured – how badly was not clear – but still alive and in hospital in Tajikistan. This pretence was maintained for several days, although Massoud's intelligence aide, Amrullah Saleh, had telephoned the CIA in Washington immediately after the assassination and told them the true story in confidence. The CIA promptly leaked Massoud's death to the Washington press.

Massoud's own immediate family – his wife Sediqa, their son, Ahmad, and their five daughters, Fatima, Mariam, Aisha, Zora, and Nasrine – were also kept in the dark. Ahmad was twelve at the time. In his own account of the way the story was hushed up, hidden even from his own family, Ahmad wrote much later on Facebook that, when he was having lunch one day in his grandmother's house, 'all of a sudden my spoon fell from my hand'.[11] His grandmother was the first to react, and she asked him, 'What has happened, my son?' He replied, 'I don't know, has something happened to my father?' to which his grandmother, trying to calm him, said, 'Nothing has happened; God is with him.' Ahmad wrote that he was unconvinced and felt 'deeply concerned and worried'. But

‘like all kids’ he became preoccupied with playing a game and forgot all about it.

One day soon afterwards, however, Massoud’s head of security, Aref, arrived to speak to Ahmad’s grandfather, Massoud’s right-hand man, Tajuddin. ‘He looked very agitated and spooked,’ Ahmad wrote. The security chief took Ahmad’s grandfather and the elder of his two uncles to the top storey of the house; half an hour later, when Aref left, Ahmad noticed that Tajuddin was ‘biting his lips and his eyes were full of tears.’ He realised then that something serious had happened.

Soon afterwards, his uncle told them that Massoud had sent instructions for them to join him in Tajikistan. When Sediqa heard this, she was furious, and demanded to speak to her husband by telephone, to ask him why he had not told her in advance about the sudden move. ‘In short,’ Ahmad wrote, ‘my mother refused to leave until they told her that Amer Saheb [Massoud] has been injured. I still remember my mother’s extremely pale and agitated face. It was unbelievable to her; she thought that this might be a nightmare and any minute she would wake up.’ Ahmad described how his grandmother took his mother’s hand and started soothing her by saying that Massoud would be alright; that, God willing, he would survive; and that it was only a small wound. Ahmad continued:

> I cannot forget how my mother refused to accept the words and continued to repeat [that] he could not be wounded; he might have been martyred [killed]. Our house was in chaos. Everyone was busy in a corner lamenting, praying, and begging God for mercy. Our house lost its usual tranquillity and pleasantness. My sisters gathered round my mother and were calmly weeping with her. I could not bear to see them in this situation, so I went upstairs to the balcony in order to view the stars that always calmed and relaxed me. Even the stars that always gave me happiness and peace could do nothing for my grief-stricken heart. I could see from the balcony that my uncle Tareq, who always stayed with us, was walking round the pool, crying. Farther out, I could see my other uncle leaning towards a wall and covering his face with his hands.[12]

Ahmad said he could not believe, and did not want to believe, the worst; he wanted to believe that he was having a bad dream and that he would wake up to hear his ‘kind father’ telling him, ‘Ahmad, get up; it is time to pray.’ He concluded, ‘I do not know how that sombre night ever ended, and with the sun rising we boarded the helicopter and departed to Tajikistan.’

Describing their journey and arrival in Dushanbe, Ahmad said ‘the grace and

radiance' of his father's presence had 'all gone away'; when they asked where he was, they were told he was not in Dushanbe but in Kulab, an airbase to the south:

> My mother constantly cried, except when she would stand for prayer. I would ask God to keep my mother busy with prayer in order for her to weep less. I could not bear to see her tears drop. Every day, we received news about my father; one would say he was a bit better; another would say he had opened his eyes; and others would tell us he had gained strength to stand up and had given new commands. The Iranian News Network would air reports that Massoud had been killed.
>
> I did not have the patience any more to listen to news coming to us. My mother and my grandmother asked to go and visit my father; however, my uncle told us that the leaders were against this and that we should wait for another few days. I still recall my grandmother becoming very angry and pressuring them to allow us to visit my father. Eventually they acquiesced to our demand and allowed us to travel to Kulab.
>
> Finally, the promised day arrived, a day which I wish had never arrived. My grandfather, eldest uncle, and mother accompanied me on the trip. In the helicopter, my uncle Rasheduddin embraced me and told me the story of [the] Prophet Mohammed [Peace be upon Him]. I had been told this story many times, but I wondered why I was being told [it] at this moment and [in this] situation. He would emphasise the fact that the Prophet Mohammed [Peace be upon Him] was an orphan. He wasn't born when he lost his father and was only a child when he lost his mother. He did not mention anything about his miracles or wisdom, nothing about his [military] campaigns or about his sword. The whole story was summed up by him being an orphan, an orphan without any parents.
>
> Finally, we arrived at the airbase in Kulab. The helicopter slowly landed, and a car came to take us to the hospital. It was a very strange experience; everyone was heartsick and gloomy. The car passed the hospital and we wondered why it was not going towards the hospital until it stopped in front of a metallic room [probably a container being used as a morgue]. They insisted we should not leave the car yet. They opened the door of the room and placed a white-coloured thing on the floor. They told us to come, and we went towards it.
>
> It was covered in a white cloth. I was totally unaware of what this was at that moment; I had never seen its kind in my life, and it was the first time I was exposed to such a thing. My grandfather told me to sit on its right side and, all of a sudden, he slowly and gently removed the white cloth, and it was my father, Ahmad Shah Massoud.[13]

Epilogue

Massoud's achievements by the time of his death, at the age of forty-eight, speak for themselves. His contribution to the defeat of the Soviet invasion force from 1979 to 1989 was undoubtedly greater than that of any other mujahideen leader, despite the ISI's refusal to give him weaponry. There was also his capture of Kabul from President Najibullah's communist government in 1992; his victory in the bloody Civil War of 1994; his successful withdrawal from Kabul to the Panjsher in 1996; and, finally, his long, defiant resistance against the Taliban – again virtually single-handed, in the sense that he received practically no help from the outside, above all the West – from 1996 until his assassination in 2001.

What is less well known is the inner man: the thinker, the strategist, the politician, the inspirer of men. His diaries give a valuable window into the man, his deep conviction, his self-discipline, and his empathy for his fellow men. The diaries are a hugely important historical archive, and I hope they will be made available as a whole to scholars, since they certainly carry much of value for future generations.

As I set about writing this biography more than ten years ago, I asked several people who knew Massoud personally to reflect on his achievements. The MI6 officer who first 'found' Massoud described his military prowess as 'unsurpassed':

> Cut off by the Soviet invasion in the strategic Panjsher Valley, he managed to see off numerous Soviet campaigns against him. By his leadership, tactical skills, and personal example and courage, he remained a thorn in the side of the Red Army until they withdrew.
>
> One only has to remember the ruined armoured vehicles that litter the sides of the Valley to see what he and his brave and dedicated fighters did to the Soviets. I don't expect we will ever truly know how many were killed on both sides, but on the Soviet side they [the mujahideen] contributed – out of all proportion to [the reported] figures – to their defeat and breakdown of morale, both in the

Red Army and its leadership, both in-country and in Moscow, which eventually led to the decision by the Politburo to pull out. He remained the key element to all this, and it must be doubted if anyone else could have done it.

On the political side of things, it is more difficult to say. Following the defeat of Najibullah, in which he and his men played a key part, and the formation of the Rabbani government in Kabul, times had changed. Here a statesman was needed, and not a 'warlord', as the press like to call them. As defence minister in the government, he was key in military decisions, especially when the Civil War broke out.[1]

The distinguished journalist and producer, Nigel Ryan, who accompanied me on the arduous first trip to see Massoud in 1982, put his thoughts succinctly in a letter he wrote to me.[2] 'The world today would be a better place if the Americans had backed Massoud to the hilt from the start (i.e. from Stinger missiles to leadership of the Northern Alliance), in other words: Massoud; a huge missed opportunity.' Nigel was writing at the time of the Iraq war, when the American interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan were looked upon with growing criticism:

First, for myself, I do think the US blundered by intervening in Iraq and not waiting out the tedious UN process. But I don't think they had any choice in Afghanistan after 9/11. They were morally justified and politically compelled to overthrow the Taliban.

The mistakes they made date back to 1979 when (1) they allowed themselves to be guided by Pakistani military intelligence – the ISI; (2) they decided that only a majority-tribe leader would be acceptable to all Afghans; (3) also by not listening to his warnings about 9/11. (At the European Parliament.)

As a result they missed the golden chance of placing their might behind one of the most remarkable guerrilla fighters of all time, who turned out to have the maturity of a strategist as well as a tactician, and into the bargain was pro-Western.

To my mind, the failure of the West – especially the Americans and the British – to support Massoud in that final period from the mid-nineties onwards was not only shameful, but was politically inept and, indeed, disastrous. The American State Department's excuse, 'We do not wish to interfere in Afghanistan's internal politics…', was particularly feeble, as well as untrue, since they supported Pakistan and the ISI, which spent all their time interfering in Afghanistan's internal politics.

If the United States had put its enormous influence and resources behind Massoud, adopting the policy developed by the British intelligence chief Gerry

Warner, who backed Massoud as the ‘Afghan Napoleon’, and whose support enabled Massoud to become ‘the Afghan who won the Cold War’, the following consequences would almost certainly have followed.

First, the Taliban would not have been able to capture Kabul and force Massoud, his army, and the rest of the Jamiat government to withdraw from Kabul in 1996. Without American encouragement of what one well-informed observer called the ‘barefoot mullahs’[3] of the Taliban, they would never have succeeded in ousting Massoud. Nor would Afghanistan have fallen under the bigoted, chauvinistic rule of the Taliban, who closed down all girls’ schools and parts of Kabul University by banning women from going out to work.

Second, the Taliban would not have been able to lay waste to so much of the north, massacring and making refugees of hundreds of thousands of Hazaras, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and members of other minorities in the Hazarajat and elsewhere.

Third, the Taliban would not have been able to gain control of Balkh Province and its capital, Mazar-i-Sharif, where the Taliban slaughtered several thousand Shias, forcing their way into the Iranian Consulate, killing several Iranian diplomats and other non-Pashtuns, and bringing Iran and Afghanistan to the brink of war.

Fourth, the Pakistanis would not have been able to virtually annex the northern city of Kunduz and garrison it with Pakistani madrasa student cannon fodder, Pakistani special forces, al-Qaeda and other international terrorists. They would eventually have been captured by Northern Alliance troops if the American vice president, Dick Cheney, had not intervened at the request of Pakistan’s president, Musharraf, to allow many of them to be flown out on secret night-time flights by the Pakistan Air Force.

Fifth, and most importantly, if the Taliban had not been allowed to gain power in Afghanistan – which they did thanks to the support of the ISI and the Saudis – and Massoud had not been abandoned, Mullah Omar, leader of the Taliban, would not have been in a position to give political asylum to Osama bin Laden, head of al-Qaeda, allowing him first to plot Massoud’s assassination and then to launch the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC, causing the deaths of nearly 3,000 innocent civilians and dealing an enormous blow to American prestige.

Despite American neglect, Massoud left an impressive legacy, in an organised

and capable guerrilla force, thousands strong, that proved an invaluable and committed ally to the United States in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. His military-political structure, the Shura-i-Nazar, and his formation of the United Front against the Taliban, bringing together the main regional and factional leaders, provided the base for a new government that took over after the collapse of the Taliban, ensuring a remarkably smooth transition to a new era of democracy and freedom. Massoud had absorbed lessons from his experience in government in the 1990s. He had been set on building an army from early on in his struggle against the Soviets in the 1980s, and would have been an outstanding partner to United States forces in Afghanistan and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force when they belatedly set about doing the same. He had learned that guerrilla fighters were not trained for civilian police work and had instituted a police academy in the Panjsher in the later 1990s in order to prepare officers for civilian rule. He had even held talks with women's representatives in 2001 to prepare a conference to address Afghan women's rights.

In my many interviews and discussions with Massoud, I found him a thoughtful, energetic leader. He possessed an enquiring mind and peppered me with questions on a wide variety of subjects. His diaries reveal him to be quite exceptionally reflective, sometimes poetic, and, above all, a strategic thinker, on a par perhaps with Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, whose fifteenth-century memoirs are a literary phenomenon.

He was deeply religious, convinced of the merit of the Islamic cause and strongly opposed to the atheism of communism. But Massoud carried his religion lightly and never talked of enforcing Islam upon society. He denounced the Taliban and al-Qaeda for their authoritarianism. His style of leadership, by contrast, was natural and sensitive to the dignity of his comrades and elders. He talked of winning people's hearts and minds, and called for elections and a traditional tribal assembly as the best means of finding a fair and just system for Afghanistan. Above all, he believed in freedom, freedom of religion and freedom from occupation.

Twenty years on from his death, as America has wearied of its involvement in Afghanistan and has mostly withdrawn its forces, Massoud's legacy is all the more worthy of consideration. The Afghan government is under pressure to

negotiate a peace settlement with the Taliban, which, thanks to continued Pakistani support, has remained a violent, reactionary force in the country. Massoud's rejection of authoritarianism and his enlightened restraint as a nationalist political leader could be a good guide for future generations.

There remains a widely held view outside Afghanistan that only a Pashtun, a member of the largest ethnic group that has traditionally ruled Afghanistan, would be acceptable to the people as a leader of the country. I remember talking to a British diplomat on his way to take up the post of high commissioner in Islamabad in the 1980s; he firmly believed that there had to be a Pashtun in charge in Afghanistan. That was standard Foreign Office policy, he said. More recently, in 2014–15, the British ambassador in Kabul was reported to have been actively pushing the case of the American-educated presidential candidate Ashraf Ghani, a Pashtun, against that of Dr Abdullah, formerly Massoud's right-hand man and usually seen as a Tajik, although he is half-Pashtun. Ghani became president of Afghanistan in 2014, but the result was contested in vain for months, because it seemed that Dr Abdullah had actually won the election. The reason for Ghani's victory was said to be the old refrain: only a Pashtun can rule Afghanistan. But Massoud's record as a brilliant guerrilla commander and national leader surely proves how out of date that axiom is. His son Ahmad said that his father would often interrupt members of his own family as well as outsiders if they described people by their ethnicity ('He or she's a Pashtun… a Tajik… an Uzbek… a Hazara…') and say, 'No, he or she is an… Afghan.'

Acknowledgements

My thanks to:

All the people who have helped me write this book with their time and insights over the years. They are too many to name individually, but their contribution has enriched this book immeasurably.

The Massoud family, in particular to Ahmad Massoud, Ahmad Wali Massoud, Yahya Massoud, and Ahmad Zia Massoud, for their many years of cooperation and for granting me access to the diaries, and to Amina Massoud for help with family photos.

Nasir Saberi, for his invaluable friendship and assistance throughout the long process of acquiring and translating the diaries.

Muslem Hayat, for his tireless support for the project and readiness to check any detail, and Jamshid, Massoud's personal secretary, for his equally vital assistance.

Peter Tomsen, for his encouragement and support for the book, his authoritative notes on the manuscript, and his generous hospitality in Virginia.

Jon Randall, for his hospitality and help with French connections, and Tony Davis for sharing his archives.

Hiromi Yasui, for her help and hospitality in Kabul and Bamiyan, and for her cover photograph.

The many photographers who shared their pictures, and to Hiromi Yasui, Reza Deghati, João Silva, Feireydoun Ganjour, Lt Col Alisher Sharabof, and the Massoud Foundation and family for donating theirs.

The late Bruce Wannell, Wais Akram, and Afsaneh Wogan, for their dedication to the translation of the diaries.

Ruhullah Khapalwak, Abdul Waheed Wafa, and the late Sultan Munadi, for

volunteering translation and research.

Nasrine Gross, for her help and hospitality in Kabul.

Ali Nazary for his work on the final diary extracts and translation. Zalmai Nishat for his help, too.

Gen. Saleh Registani and Mohammad EsHaq, for sharing their personal accounts.

Sir Nicholas Barrington and Victoria Schofield, for their support. Iradj Bagherzade for his interest and advice on publishing.

Barbara Schwepcke of Haus Publishing for remembering my reporting from Afghanistan and understanding the importance of the book; publisher Harry Hall and editor Jo Stimfield for their excellent care; Barnaby Rogerson for the inspired introduction.

Diane Steer, for her tireless transcribing of numerous taped interviews and for assembling the manuscript multiple times – and her delicious pavlovas.

Robert Howard for his help converting my slides.

Louis Bonhoure for assisting me with reporting on two trips to Kabul, and Charlotte and Freddie Bonhoure for their help with tapes, translation, and computers.

My daughter Carlotta for her skill and enthusiasm in editing the manuscript into a finished book, and Fiona and Michaela for their company and practical help throughout, on reporting trips in Afghanistan and at home in England.

And to Eleanor, my beloved departed wife, who gave so much of her time and love to Afghanistan.

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Notes

Prologue

1. Massoud's intelligence chief, Aref Sarwari, like many Afghans, is known by the honorific 'Engineer', which denotes his professional training.

1. The British 'Find' Massoud

1. See also the description of Amin's removal from power in Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979–1989* (London, 2011), 96 ff.
2. Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*.
3. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 79.
4. Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London, 1993), 87–8.
5. Now Sir Gerry Warner.
6. Gerry Warner, interview with the author, London, 9 June 2014.
7. Warner, interview with the author.
8. Religious leaders had declared the fight against communism a jihad (a holy war or struggle). Mujahideen are holy warriors, or those engaged in jihad.
9. Warner, interview with the author.
10. Warner, interview with the author.
11. Former MI6 Officer, interview with the author, London, 22 January 2014.
12. Warner, interview with the author.
13. Warner, interview with the author.
14. Warner, interview with the author.
15. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 184.
16. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is an extremist Pashtun mujahideen leader. He

received the bulk of American support and became a bitter opponent of Massoud.

2. Were We Nearly Shot?: Meeting Massoud

1. The Panjsher Valley's name means literally 'five mountains' (see Translator's Note), although it is often said to mean 'five lions'.
2. He was referring to my book *Behind Russian Lines: An Afghan Journal*, first published by Sidgwick and Jackson in 1983.
3. Sandy Gall, *Behind Russian Lines*: An Afghan Journal (London, 1983).
4. Gall, *Behind Russian Lines*.
5. Jean-José Puig is a French computer expert and a great admirer of Massoud, whom he knew from the previous summer.
6. Nearly three years later, in May 1985, the head of intelligence of the Afghan General Staff, General Khalil, was arrested with ten of his officers and eight others, accused of running a spy network on behalf of Massoud, who claimed that no operation had ever been mounted against him without his agents warning him of it in advance. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 139.
7. Our crew consisted of Nigel Ryan, cameraman Charles Morgan, sound man Tom Murphy, and myself. We ran into Anthony 'Tony' Davis of the Hong Kong–based news magazine *Asiaweek* in the Panjsher Valley.

3. The Boy Who Loved Playing Soldiers

1. According to his family, Massoud's date of birth was 11 Saunbolah 1332 in the Afghan calendar, or 2 September 1953.
2. Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton, NJ, 1980), 332 ff.
3. The Koh-i-Noor is now part of the British Crown Jewels. Two centuries later, his namesake, Massoud, although a Tajik not a Pashtun, was to have almost as meteoric a career.
4. Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana* (London, 1937).
5. Nancy Hatch Dupree, *An Historical Guide to Afghanistan* (Kabul,

1977), 251.

6. Michael Barry, *Massoud: De l'islamisme* à *la liberté* (Paris, 2002), 67.
7. Barry, *Massoud*, 67.
8. Barry, *Massoud*, 68.
9. Barry, *Massoud*.
10. Bruce Riedel, *What We Won: America's Secret War in Afghanistan, 1979–89* (Washington, DC, 2014), 45; and Peter B. DeNeufville, 'Ahmad Shah Massoud and the genesis of the nationalist anti-Communist movement in Northeastern Afghanistan, 1969–1979', PhD thesis, King's College London, 2006, 72–3.
11. Barry, *Massoud*.
12. Barry, *Massoud*, 71.
13. Saleh Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi* (Moscow, 2003). Extract translated by Naser Saberi.
14. Yahya Massoud, private conversation with the author, Panjsher Valley, 1982.

4. The Coup that Failed: Exile in Pakistan

1. Yahya Massoud, private conversation with the author.
2. DeNeufville, 'Ahmad Shah Massoud', 103.
3. Masood Khalili, interview with Carlotta Gall, Kabul, 2019.
4. Masood Khalili, interview with the author, Kabul, 2015.
5. DeNeufville, 'Ahmad Shah Massoud', 145–60.
6. Tajuddin, interview with the author, Panjsher Valley, 2016.
7. All subsequent quotations in this chapter are from Tajuddin, interview with the author.

5. Bombed by the Russians in the Panjsher

1. DeNeufville, 'Ahmad Shah Massoud'.
2. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 142.

3. ‘PK’ stands for ‘Pulemyot Kalashnikov’, a widely used Russian machine gun.
4. Sandy Gall, *Behind Russian Lines: An Afghan Journal* (London, 1983).
5. Speaking of the West aiding the resistance, I should have known that the Americans were already giving the mujahideen vast quantities of Soviet and Chinese weapons, bought on the black market and distributed by Pakistan’s military intelligence, the ISI.
6. Friedrich von Logau, quoted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (London, 1953), 315.
7. Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York, 2011), 252–3.

6. The Russians Propose a Ceasefire

1. This account of the ceasefire is drawn from interviews by the author with some of the main Afghan participants, including Mirdad and General Saleh Registani – who recorded Massoud’s personal account in December 2000 and interviewed Colonel Anatoli Tkachev in 2003 – as well as material from Russian archives published by A. A. Lyakhovsky and V. M. Nekrasov and by Rodric Braithwaite, the former British Ambassador to Moscow.
2. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
3. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*. Registani, Massoud’s military attaché for a period in Moscow, spent three years searching for Colonel Anatoli Tkachev and interviewed him on 26 April 2003 for a history of the ceasefire, which is included in his book.
4. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi.*
5. Mirdad, interview with the author, Kabul, 2014; see also Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
6. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi.*
7. A. A. Lyakhovsky and V. M. Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, politik, voin* (Moscow, 2007), 18.
8. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 185 ff. Braithwaite draws on Lyakhovsky and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, politik, voin*.

9. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
10. Leonid Brezhnev, general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR, died on 10 November 1982.
11. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
12. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
13. ‘Kaka’ means ‘uncle’ and is used as an honorific.

7. Massoud Deals with the Russians

1. Lyakhovsky and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, politik, voin*.
2. Lyakhovsky and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, politik, voin*; and Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*.
3. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
4. Lyakhovsky and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, politik, voin*.
5. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
6. Lyakhovsky and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, politik, voin*.
7. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
8. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*
9. Massoud, quoted in Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
10. Ahmad Massoud, private conversation with the author, Penshurst, Kent, 2014.
11. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
12. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi.*
13. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi.*
14. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi.*
15. In fact, the Russo-Afghan party consisted of four people, led by Colonel Anatoli, and Massoud seems to have been virtually on his own.
16. Lyakhovsky and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, politik, voin.*
17. Lyakhovsky and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, politik, voin*.
18. Massoud, quoted in Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi.*
19. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi.*
20. Anatoli, quoted in Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.

21. Lyakhovsky and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, politik, voin*.
22. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
23. Agha Sahib was later discovered and executed.
24. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
25. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
26. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
27. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
28. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
29. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
30. Lyakhovsky and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, politik, voin*.
31. Lyakhovsky and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, politik, voin*.
32. Ahmad Shah Massoud, interview with the author, Afghanistan, 1986.
33. Massoud, quoted in Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
34. Massoud, quoted in Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
35. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
36. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
37. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
38. Lyakhovsky and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, politik, voin*.
39. Registani, *Massoud Wa Azadi*.
40. Mirdad, interview with the author, Kabul, 2014. Sadly, both Mirdad and Anatoli are now deceased.

8. Marriage and War

1. Sources close to Massoud told me that he felt it was unacceptable to have a lavish wedding in the middle of such a devastating war.
2. Sediqa Massoud, Chékéba Hachemi, Marie-Françoise Colombani, *Pour l'amour de Massoud* (Paris, 2005), 96 ff.
3. Massoud, Hachemi, and Colombani, *Pour l'amour de Massoud*, 103. Sediqa adds that Massoud often talked of the importance of respecting women and appointing them to important positions of power, but he also often told her that he wanted to be the only person to have the privilege of looking at her.
4. Massoud, Hachemi, and Colombani, *Pour l'amour de Massoud*, 105.

5. Massoud, Hachemi, and Colombani, *Pour l'amour de Massoud*, 108.
6. Massoud, Hachemi, and Colombani, *Pour l'amour de Massoud*, 109–10.
7. Massoud, Hachemi, and Colombani, *Pour l'amour de Massoud*, 117.
8. Massoud, Hachemi, and Colombani, *Pour l'amour de Massoud*, 113.
9. Tajuddin, interview with the author.
10. Tajuddin, interview with the author.
11. Tajuddin, interview with the author.
12. Tajuddin, interview with the author.

9. Defeat and Failure: 'Am I Afraid of Death?'

1. These extracts are from the first of three volumes of diaries dating from the 1980s that are in the possession of Ahmad Wali Massoud. The diaries were transcribed by General Wadud, with some redactions and omissions. This first volume was translated by the late Bruce Wannell, whose observations appear in the Translator's Note. In some places, there are gaps in the transcript. An extended dash indicates either a redaction or difficulty in deciphering Massoud's handwriting.
2. The transcription gives the year 1348, which corresponds with 1969 in the Western calendar and is probably a typographical mistake. I have therefore inserted 1975 here, since Massoud appears to be referring to the failed 'coup' of 1975.
3. Throughout this whole passage, where Massoud writes 'Khost' and sometimes 'Fereng', he is referring to Khost-i-Fereng, the easternmost district of Baghlan province, not to be mistaken for the city of Khost in eastern Afghanistan.
4. Hamal is the month of Aries. Afghan months correspond with the signs of the zodiac, and the year begins in spring, on the day equivalent to 21 March.
5. 'Sar Anwal' is a title meaning 'Military Gendarme' or 'Prosecutor'.
6. Saur is Taurus.
7. Darwaza is the pass used to cross from Khost-i-Fereng to the Panjsher.

8. Massoud notes in a later passage that, in the Afghan calendar, it began on 14 Saratan (Cancer) and ended on 24 Saratan.

10. The Russian Perspective

1. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 219.
2. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 219.
3. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 219–20.
4. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*. This account by a Russian soldier previously appeared in Lyakhovsky and Nekrasov, *Grazhdanin, politik, voin*, 18.
5. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*.
6. Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 223.

11. A Winter Offensive

1. Aqrab is Scorpio.
2. A name is omitted here in the transcript, perhaps because the handwritten word was illegible.
3. Qaus is Sagittarius.
4. Massoud's letters to Burhanuddin Rabbani and other Jamiat officials at the time, published by Engineer Mohammad EsHaq, reveal Massoud's growing frustrations over the lack of support from his party leader. Rabbani was under pressure from Pakistan, which opposed Massoud's growing military power. See Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, 220–1.
5. A lakh is a unit of 100,000; 90 lakh afghanis is 9,000,000 afghanis.
6. Massoud later records in his diary that he succeeded in taking the government base at Pushghur the following year, using an idea put forward by a young mujahid for units to cross the river by a bridge near the base at night and then infiltrate the base.
7. The subsequent diary entries are from a second volume, also in the possession of Ahmad Wali Massoud and transcribed by General Wadud with some redactions. The translation was kindly done by Wais Akram and Naser Saberi.

8. The Basmachis led an insurrection against Imperial and then Soviet Russia in the early twentieth century in Central Asia but were ultimately defeated by the Bolshevik government.
9. Massoud often writes in the first-person plural. See Translator's Note.

12. Massoud Takes Farkhar

1. For a full account of my trip to Afghanistan in 1986, see Sandy Gall, *Afghanistan: Agony of a Nation* (London, 1988).
2. Khalili always called Massoud 'Commander', dropping the definite article.
3. Gall, *Afghanistan*, 129 ff.
4. The walkie-talkies were also supplied by MI6, I was told by British sources.
5. See Chapters 6 and 7 for the ceasefire.

13. Expanding into the North

1. This third volume of diaries from the 1980s is in the possession of Ahmad Wali Massoud. It was transcribed by General Wadud with some redactions and omissions, possibly because of the difficulty of reading Massoud's handwriting. Translation by Afsaneh Wogan, with some sections by Naser Saberi and Charlotte Bonhoure.
2. Massoud revisits the aftermath of the ceasefire in this volume. Although there is some repetition, I have chosen to reproduce the entire diary.
3. The month is left blank.
4. The Central Units were elite forces formed of fighters selected from districts all over Afghanistan, who were trained by Massoud's own trainers.
5. Peshawar remained the centre of the seven political parties of the Afghan resistance, including Massoud's own party, Jamiat-i-Islami.
6. See Chapter 14.

14. The Russians Prepare to Withdraw

1. ‘Excerpts From Gorbachev’s Speech to the Party’, *The New York Times*, 26 Feb. 1986.
2. Colonel Ahmad Muslem Hayat was one of the elite trained officers in the mujahideen who were selected by Massoud for specialist training abroad. He served as brigade commander in Kabul and later as military attaché in London.
3. The last Soviet soldiers left Afghanistan on 15 February 1989.
4. This date has probably been misread or incorrectly transcribed, since the events related occurred in March 1989.
5. The attack on Jalalabad began on Sunday, 5 March 1989.
6. The Persian text is incomplete here.

15. Massoud Captures Kabul

1. ‘Kilim Jam’ translates literally as ‘someone who rolls up a carpet’ and, by extension, ‘carpet stealer’.
2. See Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*; and Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (London, 2004).
3. Robert D. Kaplan, ‘The Afghan Who Won the Cold War’, *Wall Street Journal*, 5 May 1992.
4. Kaplan, ‘The Afghan Who Won the Cold War’.

16. Under Siege: Massoud in Kabul

1. Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A New History* (London, 2001), 179–80.
2. Peter Tomsen, private correspondence with the author, 2019.
3. Sandy Gall, ‘Ahmad’s Hour of Need’, *Daily Telegraph*, 12 Sept. 1992, 26–7.
4. Gall, ‘Ahmad’s Hour of Need’.
5. 30,000 afghanis was equal to about £20 at the time.

6. Gall, ‘Ahmad’s Hour of Need’.
7. Former MI6 Officer, interview with the author.
8. Gall, ‘Ahmad’s Hour of Need’.
9. Sandy Gall, ‘Afghan Pol Pot prepares to strike’, *The Sunday Times*, 11 July 1993, 1, 18.
10. Sandy Gall, ‘An interview with commander Ahmed Shah Masud’, *Asian Affairs*, 25 (1994), 139–55.
11. Gall, ‘An interview with commander Ahmed Shah Masud’.
12. Gall, ‘An interview with commander Ahmed Shah Masud’.
13. Gall, ‘An interview with commander Ahmed Shah Masud’.
14. Gall, ‘An interview with commander Ahmed Shah Masud’.
15. Gall, ‘An interview with commander Ahmed Shah Masud’.
16. Gall, ‘An interview with commander Ahmed Shah Masud’.
17. Gall, ‘An interview with commander Ahmed Shah Masud’.
18. Gall, ‘An interview with commander Ahmed Shah Masud’. Massoud persisted with his efforts to establish a government of technocrats. He convened a conference in Herat in July 1994 to propose a government of technocrats led by Dr Mohammad Yusuf, a former prime minister under King Zahir Shah, to replace the mujahideen government, although it was thwarted by internal opposition.
19. Sandy Gall, ‘Ahmed Shah Massoud, head of government forces in Afghanistan, talked to Sandy Gall about the battle for control’, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 15 Jan. 1994, 32.
20. John Jennings, interview with the author, Arizona, 2017.
21. Jennings, interview with the author.
22. Jennings, interview with the author.
23. Jennings, interview with the author.
24. Jennings, interview with the author.
25. Jennings, interview with the author.
26. Wafa later worked as a reporter for *The New York Times* in Kabul, and then became director of Nancy Dupree’s archive and resource centre, the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University (ACKU).
27. Christophe de Ponfilly, *Massoud l’Afghan: Celui que l’Occident n’a pas écouté* (Paris, 2002) 245.
28. Jennings, interview with the author.

17. Tea and Rockets with the Taliban

1. Sandy Gall, ‘Kabul’s Mr Fixit Maps a Way out of the Morass’, *The Times*, 25 June 1996, 17.
2. A *landay* is a non-rhyming couplet popular in Pashtu-speaking areas.
3. The meeting took place on 13 February 1995, just days after the Taliban had taken the city of Maidanshahr.
4. The elders were: Maulvi Zahir from Tagab district; Saif al-Rahman, son of Maulvi Nasrullah Mansour of Paktia province; and Maulvi Fazal, deputy of Maulvi Shafiullah from Deh Sabz district of Kabul.
5. Shamsurahman, personal account for this book, relayed by Saleh Registani, 10 January 2020. Translation by Ruhullah Khapalwak.
6. Colonel Ahmad Muslem Hayat, personal account for this book, 12 May 2019.
7. Shamsurahman, personal account.
8. Shamsurahman, personal account.
9. Written account provided to the author by an eyewitness on condition his identity not be published. Translation by Ruhullah Khapalwak.
10. Mullah Rabbani stayed at home for months but returned to office when the Taliban took control of Kabul the following year.
11. Gall, ‘Kabul’s Mr Fixit’.
12. Gall, ‘Kabul’s Mr Fixit’.
13. Gall, ‘Kabul’s Mr Fixit’.
14. Anthony Davis, ‘How the Taliban Became a Military Force’ in William Maley, ed, *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (London, 1998), 65 ff.
15. Davis, ‘How the Taliban Became a Military Force’.
16. Khalili, interview with Carlotta Gall.
17. Roy Gutman, *How We Missed the Story: Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, and the Hijacking of Afghanistan* (Washington, DC, 2008), 51 ff.
18. Gutman, *How We Missed the Story*.
19. Gutman, *How We Missed the Story*.
20. Gutman, *How We Missed the Story*.

18. Mortal Enemies

1. Majrooh was the founder of the Afghan Information Centre, which was one of the few independent sources of news for Afghan refugees in Peshawar, and which published a newspaper and other reports.
2. Warner, interview with the author.

19. Massoud Retreats from Kabul

1. Sandy Gall, 'When David took on Goliath', *New Statesman*, 15 October 2001.
2. Amrullah Saleh, interview with the author, Kabul, 2016. Saleh was one of Massoud's trained officers and served in the intelligence and foreign ministry departments. He went on to become head of intelligence in the Karzai government and vice president of the country in 2020.
3. Colonel Ahmad Muslem Hayat, interview with the author, Penshurst, Kent, 2016.
4. Massoud often said Pakistani troops were deployed to bolster Taliban forces in important battles. Foreign intelligence officials said the same, although Pakistan always denied direct involvement of its troops.
5. Muslem Hayat, interview with the author, Penshurst.
6. Muslem Hayat, interview with the author, Penshurst.
7. Amrullah Saleh, interview with the author, Kabul, 2016.
8. Dr Abdullah, interview with the author, Kabul, August 2015.
9. Abdullah, interview with the author, 2015.
10. Amrullah Saleh, interview with the author, Kabul, 2016.

20. A Low Ebb

1. The Taliban assault on the Panjsher began on 8 October 1996. See John Burns, 'Afghan Driven From Kabul Makes Stand in the North', *The New York Times*, 8 October 1996, Section A, p. 8.

2. See Ponfilly, *Massoud l'Afghan*, 226.
3. Ahmad Jamshid, interview with the author, London, 2016.
4. Saleh, interview with the author.
5. Muslem Hayat, interview with the author, Penshurst.
6. Ponfilly, *Massoud l'Afghan*.
7. Colonel Ahmad Muslem Hayat, interview with the author, London, 2019.
8. Ahmad Shah Massoud, handwritten letter, 27 February 1997, translated by Afsaneh Wogan.
9. Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, 542. Thanks to Peter Tomsen, who first told this story in his book.
10. Ponfilly, *Massoud l'Afghan*, 203 ff.
11. Ponfilly, *Massoud l'Afghan*.
12. Ponfilly, *Massoud l'Afghan*, 215.
13. Ponfilly, *Massoud l'Afghan*, 224.
14. Ponfilly, *Massoud l'Afghan*, 217.
15. Ponfilly, *Massoud l'Afghan*, 220–1.
16. Ponfilly, *Massoud l'Afghan*, 210.
17. Ponfilly, *Massoud l'Afghan*, 175.
18. Abdul Rahim Ghafoorzai had been a senior Afghan diplomat in the United States when the communists took power. Refusing to work for the communist regime, he resigned and sought asylum for himself and his family in America, only returning to Afghanistan when Massoud took Kabul in 1992, driving out the communist rump government of President Najibullah. As a liberal himself, Ghafoorzai soon became close to Massoud, advising him on Western, especially American, policy. He became prime minister of the Northern Alliance shortly before his death in a plane crash.
19. See Chapter 21 for Ahmad Massoud's description of the relationship between the two men.
20. Saleh, interview with the author.
21. The subsequent diary extracts come from notebooks in the possession of Ahmad Massoud, who selected nine pages for use in this book. The handwritten diaries were transcribed and translated, with some small redactions, by a friend of the Massoud family, Ali Nazary.

22. Maidanshahr, literally ‘field of the kings’, is a floodplain just north of the village of Jangalak, where earlier rulers of Afghanistan came to watch annual games of *buzkashi*, Afghanistan’s national sport, played by teams on horseback.
23. The American oil company Unocal was trying to work out a deal with the Taliban to run an oil pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India.
24. The Durrani and the Ghilzai are the two main Pashtun tribes from which most sub-tribes and clans are descended.
25. The Khalq (‘people’) was one of the two wings of the communist party, the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan. The Khalq wing, which was dominated by Ghilzai Pashtuns, ruled Afghanistan from April 1978 to December 1979. The Taliban co-opted many former communists to help run their military campaign and undermine tribal leaders opposed to them.
26. The Western media tended to refer to both the Shura-i-Nazar and the United Front as the Northern Alliance.
27. Ponfilly, *Massoud l’Afghan*, 210.
28. Atta Mohammad Noor, interview with the author, Mazar-i-Sharif, 2015. Noor proved an important player in the defeat of the Taliban in the north in 2001, and he became a powerful political figure as governor of Balkh province in the years after.
29. In the handwritten diary, Massoud appears to have written the year 1371, which may be a mistake. I have used 1377 (1998), since his family and commanders confirm that this is the date the Malaspa base was set up.
30. Mohammed Fahim succeeded Massoud as leader of the United Front and later became defence minister, marshal, and vice president under Hamid Karzai after 2001.
31. Massoud’s family stayed outside the country in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, for more than a year, but by January 2000 he had consolidated his defences in the Panjsher enough to bring them back.
32. Barry Bearak, ‘Onslaught by the Taliban Leaves Afghans Dead or Homeless’, *The New York Times*, 18 Oct. 1999, Section A, p 1.
33. Bearak, ‘Onslaught by the Taliban’.
34. Dr Abdullah, interview with the author, Kabul, 2016.

35. Abdullah, interview with the author, 2016.
36. Muslem, interview with the author, London, 2019.
37. Muslem, interview with the author, London, 2019.
38. Piotr Balcerowicz, 'The Last Interview with Ahmed Shah Masood', *Ian Bach* (Aug. 2001), https://ianbachusa.wordpress.com/2015/06/07/interview-with-ahmed-shah-massoud/amp/, accessed 19 Apr. 2021, originally published in Polish in *Rzeczpospolita*, 23 Sept. 2001.
39. Balcerowicz, 'The Last Interview'.
40. Balcerowicz, 'The Last Interview'.
41. Balcerowicz, 'The Last Interview'.
42. Balcerowicz, 'The Last Interview'.
43. Balcerowicz, 'The Last Interview'.

21. 'My Father was Incorruptible'

1. Abdul Haq re-entered Afghanistan from neighbouring Pakistan in the dying days of the Taliban regime but was captured and executed by the brutal Taliban interior minister, Mullah Abdul Razzaq.
2. Massoud was planning a second visit to Europe, this time to London, to raise awareness of and support for his vision for Afghanistan.

22. Massoud Visits Europe

1. Nancy Hatch Dupree, *An Historical Guide to Afghanistan*, 153.
2. For accounts of the internal strains of the group against Massoud, see Waheed Mozdah, [article on Massoud's assassination], Ansar Press, http://ansarpress.com/farsi/2411, accessed online 19 Apr. 2021, originally posted on Mozdah's Facebook page and reproduced in the Afghan media. See also Abdullah Anas, with Tam Hussein, *To the Mountains: My Life in Jihad from Algeria to Afghanistan* (London, 2019).
3. Nicole Fontaine, preface to Mehrabodin Masstan and Pilar Hélène Surgers, *Massoud au Coeur* (Monaco, 2003), 14.

4. Bruno Philip, ‘Le commandant Massoud estime que sans l’aide du Pakistan les talibans « ne pourraient pas tenir »’, *Le Monde* (2001), accessed online 19 Apr. 2021.
5. Fontaine, preface to *Massoud au Coeur*, 14.
6. Patricia Lalonde, *Paris-Kaboul: Journal d’une femme revoltée* (Paris, 2007), 53.
7. Irene Pastecchi, ‘Ahmad Shah Massoud al Parlamento Europeo’ [video], YouTube (uploaded 30 Mar. 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYm_2IkaPBc.
8. Masood Khalili, statement to Scotland Yard, investigation into the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, 12 Dec. 2001, courtesy of Ahmad Wali Massoud.
9. Pastecchi, ‘Ahmad Shah Massoud al Parlamento Europeo’.
10. Pastecchi, ‘Ahmad Shah Massoud al Parlamento Europeo’.
11. Pastecchi, ‘Ahmad Shah Massoud al Parlamento Europeo’.

23. How They Killed Massoud

1. The Tagab is also known as the Tagao Valley; *ab* and *ao*, meaning ‘water’ or ‘river’, are interchangeable in Persian.
2. The two men travelled under the fake names Karim Touzani and Kassim Bakkali.
3. These details are widely known among Afghan military and intelligence officials, and they appear in Waheed Mozdah, [article on Massoud’s assassination], Ansar Press, http://ansarpress.com/farsi/2411, accessed 19 Apr. 2021, originally posted on Mozdah’s Facebook page and reproduced in the Afghan media.
4. Marie-Rose Armesto, *Son Mari a tué Massoud* (Paris, 2002), 32.
5. Armesto, *Son Mari a tué Massoud*, 41.
6. Paul Cruickshank, ‘Assassin’s wife: My undying affection for bin Laden’, *CNN*, 10 Feb. 2009.
7. Armesto, *Son Mari a tué Massoud*.
8. Mohammad EsHaq, interview with the author, Kabul, *c.*2013.
9. EsHaq, interview with the author.

10. Amrullah Saleh, statement to Scotland Yard, investigation into the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, 2 Feb. 2002, courtesy of Ahmad Wali Massoud.
11. Ahmad Jamshid, interview with the author, London, 2016.
12. Jamshid, interview with the author.
13. Matthew Leeming, 'Breakfast with the Killers', *The Spectator*, 29 September 2001.
14. These marks are sometimes the result of frequent praying.
15. Leeming, 'Breakfast with the Killers'.
16. Ahmad Massoud, interview with the author, London, 2015.
17. Ahmad Massoud, interview with the author.
18. Bismillah Khan, interview with the author, Kabul, 2016.
19. Jamshid, interview with the author.
20. Fahim Dashty, interview with the author, Kabul, 2014.
21. Massoud, Hachemi, and Colombani, *Pour l'amour de Massoud*, 248.
22. Saleh, statement to Scotland Yard.
23. Françoise Causse, *Quand la France préférait les taliban: Massoud in memoriam* (Paris, 2004), 147.
24. Causse, *Quand la France préférait les taliban*, 147.
25. Shoukria Haider, interview with the author, Kabul, 2016.
26. Haider, interview with the author.
27. Edward Girardet, *Killing the Cranes: A Reporter's Journey Through Three Decades of War in Afghanistan* (London, 2011), 28.
28. Girardet, *Killing the Cranes*.
29. Akbari's brother, Mohammad Yunus, Afghanistan's only nuclear physicist, was a Maoist, which would not have pleased Massoud, but Akbari worked closely with Massoud setting up community councils in later years.
30. Girardet, *Killing the Cranes*.
31. Engineer Aref Sarwari, statement to Scotland Yard, investigation into the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, 12 Mar. 2002, courtesy of Ahmad Wali Massoud.
32. Sarwari, statement to Scotland Yard.
33. Leeming, 'Breakfast with the Killers'.

34. Asadullah Khaled, interview with the author, Kabul, 2016.
35. Khaled, interview with the author.
36. Khalili, statement to Scotland Yard.
37. Maulvi Jamil Rahman, a Salafi leader in Kunar province, was assassinated in the 1980s by an Egyptian fighter named Rumi, who carried out the attack knowing he could not escape.
38. Jamshid, interview with the author.
39. Ahmad Massoud, interview with the author.

24. The Eve of Assassination

1. Khalili, statement to Scotland Yard.
2. Khalili, statement to Scotland Yard.
3. Khalili, statement to Scotland Yard.
4. Jamshid, interview with the author.
5. Jamshid, interview with the author.
6. Jamshid, interview with the author.
7. Jamshid, interview with the author.
8. Jamshid, interview with the author.
9. See also Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, 582 ff.
10. Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan.*
11. Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan.*
12. Jamshid, interview with the author.
13. Khalili, statement to Scotland Yard.
14. Engineer Aref Sarwari, statement to Scotland Yard, investigation into the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, 12 Mar. 2002, courtesy of Ahmad Wali Massoud.
15. Khalili, statement to Scotland Yard.
16. Khalili, statement to Scotland Yard.

25. A Final Encounter

1. On 7 December 1941, without warning, 353 Japanese fighters and

bombers, launched in two waves from six aircraft carriers, attacked the United States navy fleet in Hawaii. The Japanese kamikaze strike sank four American battleships and damaged four others, and sank or damaged three cruisers, three destroyers, and (ironically) one anti-aircraft training ship. It also destroyed 188 American aircraft and killed 2,402 Americans. The Japanese lost only twenty-nine planes and five midget submarines. Pearl Harbor shook America to the core and brought the United States – reluctant to be involved until then – into the Second World War, with devastating effect. Only the fact that the Japanese attack was on Hawaii and not mainland America makes it take second place to 9/11 as a national disaster.

2. Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, 585.
3. Masood Khalili, interview with the author, Kabul, 2016.
4. Khalili, statement to Scotland Yard.
5. Masood Khalili, statement to Scotland Yard, investigation into the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, 12 Dec. 2001, courtesy of Ahmad Wali Massoud.
6. A former head of Afghan intelligence who wishes to remain anonymous, interview with the author, Kabul, 2016.
7. Waheed Mozhdah, interview with Fiona Gall, Kabul, 2017.
8. Mozhdah, interview with Fiona Gall.
9. In his article, Mozhdah named Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Hafs Kabir, Saif al-Adl, and Abu Hafs Saghir Mauritania as present.
10. Ahmad Wali Massoud, interview with the author, 2016.
11. Ahmad Massoud, [Facebook post] (7 Sept. 2013), https://www.facebook.com/ahmadmassoud1/posts/177432082440234, accessed 19 Apr., 2021.
12. Ahmad Massoud, [Facebook post] (7 Sept. 2013).
13. Ahmad Massoud, [Facebook post] (7 Sept. 2013).

Epilogue

1. Former MI6 Officer, interview with the author.

2. Nigel Ryan’s distinguished journalistic career began at Reuters news agency; in 1961, he joined ITN in London and became its editor in 1971. After ITN, he was a vice president of NBC in New York and produced David Frost’s interviews with Richard Nixon, returning to London in 1980 as director of programmes at Thames Television.
3. Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan*, 539.

Index

A

Al-Qaeda 254, 269, 300, 312–3
  and 9/11 terror attacks 299–300
  and Afghan Services Bureau 159, 270
  and Taliban 252, 271, 281
  and Massoud's assassination 274–7, 303–4
Amin, Hafizullah 3–4, 27
Anaba 32, 51–3, 63, 70–1, 76, 79, 81, 84, 93, 109, 153, 234, 247
Andropov, Yuri 3–4, 55, 72, 77, 81, 83
Astana 103, 109, 135, 278

B

Bagram Air Base 34, 40, 56, 65, 81, 109, 141, 165, 181–2, 184, 187, 205, 230, 233, 238, 250
Bazarak 31, 38, 53, 62, 93, 122, 153
Bhutto, Zulfiqar Ali 27
bin Laden, Osama 194, 258, 270–1, 279, 300, 304, 312
  and Afghanistan 252, 269, 302–3
  and terrorism 257, 272, 276, 279, 302–3
Brezhnev, Leonid 3, 26, 55, 64, 81

C

Carter, Jimmy 3–4
Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) 4, 6, 35, 227

relationship with Massoud 8, 48, 180, 200, 257, 305
Charasyab 198, 218–19, 231
Charikar 181–2, 187, 238–9, 277, 295

D

Dar-e-Suf 252, 255, 282
Dasht-i-Rewat 36, 48, 50, 103, 106, 110, 121–2, 249
Dostum, Abdul Rashid 190–1, 220, 235, 264, 268
alliance with Massoud 181, 183, 186, 234, 244, 246, 282
betrayal of Massoud 205–6
and Kilim Jam 179–80, 183
Dr Abdullah 223, 230, 278, 288, 290, 314
as Massoud's aide 193, 221, 231, 237, 253–4, 313

E

Engineer Mohammad EsHaq 25, 27, 34, 277–8, 316

F

Farkhar 46, 75, 138–48, 152, 154, 157–9, 167, 170, 248
as a military base 82, 155, 162, 172
massacre at 225
Fontaine, Nicole 270–1

H

Hafez 221, 263, 294
Hekmatyar, Gulbuddin
alliance with Dostum 205–6
attempted coup in Kabul 182–3
the author's interview with 198
blockading Massoud's supply routes 49–50, 64, 69, 73–4, 97–8

early activism 27
killings by 225–7
shelling of Kabul 190, 194, 232–3
US support for 48, 180, 227
Herat 19–20, 90, 265, 282, 293
fighting in 30, 219, 222, 257
Hisb-i-Islami 27, 49, 65, 99, 107, 155, 166–7, 172–3, 183–4, 187, 204–5, 226
conflict with Massoud 69, 73, 94, 97–8, 151–2, 156, 164, 167, 180, 187, 245–46
and Pakistan 171, 176, 199
Hisb-i-Wahdat 194–5, 206–8, 219, 244
atrocities committed by 209
and Iran 197, 199

I

Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) 8, 27–8, 180, 211, 226, 237, 244, 304, 312
and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar 48, 179, 182, 190
and Massoud's assassination 272, 276–7, 280, 292, 302
and the Taliban 258, 271, 312
and the USA 48, 200, 227, 310–11
Ittihad-i-Islami 194, 206, 274

J

Jalalabad 142, 231, 244, 246, 251–2, 265, 274, 276–7
attacks on 171, 176–7
conference in 198, 202–3
Taliban's capture of 228–9
Jamiat-i-Islami 75, 98, 150, 173, 174
association with Massoud 126, 154, 192, 239
and Burhanuddin Rabbani 25, 29, 81, 191, 299
Jangalak 19, 28, 66, 240, 263, 283

Jebal Seraj 31, 40, 118, 177, 181–2, 187, 198, 205, 207, 230–1, 245

K

Kabul
factional fighting in 194, 205–9
Hekmatyar's shelling of 191–9
Massoud on governing 266–8
Massoud's capture of 179–88
Massoud's youth in 20–5
Soviet invasion of 4
Taliban attack of 211, 219, 222, 228–30
Kandahar 19, 211–13, 216, 218, 258, 265, 303
Karmal, Babrak 67–8, 70, 73, 83, 144
Khalili, Khalilullah 29–30, 290–1
Khalili, Masood 29–30, 139–41, 209, 223, 271–2
and Massoud's assassination 1, 288–98, 300–2
Khalq 26, 32, 169, 172, 242
Khenj 18, 35–40, 100, 103, 106, 110, 121, 131
Khoja Bahauddin 1, 253, 255, 261, 280, 282–5, 292–5
Khost-i-Fereng 75, 82, 85, 92, 95, 104, 108, 165
Kilim Jam 179–80, 183, 188

M

Maidanshahr 215, 217, 265
Massoud, Ahmad (son of Ahmad Shah Massoud) 33, 64, 90–1, 218, 261–8, 280, 283, 289, 305–8
Massoud, Ahmad Wali 22–3, 28, 90, 138, 288, 300, 304–5
Massoud, Ahmad Zia 28, 94, 170
Massoud, Sediqa 31, 85–7, 90, 149, 283, 305–7
Mazar-i-Sharif 65, 156, 165, 170, 181, 187, 235, 243, 246–7, 311

MI6 4–8, 46, 107, 193, 309
Mirdad Khan 51–61, 77, 81–4
Muslim Youth Organisation 25–7

N

Najibullah, Mohammad ‘Dr Najib’, 144, 162, 169, 171–4, 206, 264
  downfall of 171, 179, 181–3, 187, 191, 194, 199–200
  opposition to ceasefire 68
Namakau Valley 139, 155, 166–7, 172
Nuristan 30, 73, 107, 139, 156, 226, 246

P

Parcham 27
People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) 26, 146
Piu 87, 149, 170, 174
Prince Daoud 25–7, 29
Pushghur 69, 117–8, 120, 122–3, 125, 127, 130–3, 141, 153

R

Rabbani, Burhanuddin 25, 29, 64– 5, 81, 98, 107, 158–9, 162–3, 211
  disagreement with Massoud 235–6, 239
  early support for Taliban 215
  and new government 173, 190–2, 194, 202, 219, 221–2, 232, 248, 278
  opposition to Hekmatyar 173, 213
  response to Massoud’s assassination 299–300
Rahman, Amir Abdur 6, 256
Roitang Gorge 231, 234
Rokha 16–7, 27, 38, 41–2, 47, 53, 58, 61, 63, 68, 70–1, 74, 94, 103, 122, 153

S

Sangin 212–3, 215

Sarobi 196, 204, 229

Sawari, Engineer Aref 1, 147, 283, 287, 292, 295

Sayyaf, Abdul Rasul 171, 194, 206, 208–9, 231, 235, 244–5, 274–5, 277–8

Shaba 103, 126

Shiberghan 191, 206

Shura-i-Nazar 164–6, 312

  formation of 65, 75, 82

  improvement of 155, 157, 160

Skrzypkowiak, Andy 138–9, 141–2, 145, 226

Spetsnaz 11, 49, 112

Suhail, Asim 1, 285–6, 288

T

Tajuddin, ‘Kaka’ 17, 37, 40, 44, 59, 87–9, 94, 262, 305–6

  assisting wounded Massoud 31–3

  and Massoud’s marriage 85–6

  and meeting between Massoud and Anatoli 61–2

Taliban

  alliance with al-Qaeda 252, 257

  attack on Kabul 211, 219, 222, 228–30

  attacks on the Panjsher 234, 247–51

  foreign backing 228

  Massoud’s assessment of 241–4, 246, 255–8, 271–3

  Massoud’s meeting with 215–9

  Massoud’s resistance to 236, 244, 250, 252–4, 257, 265

  plot to assassinate Massoud 280–1, 301–3

  rule in Kandahar 212–5

  US implicit support for 223–4

Taloqan 149, 154, 158, 160, 164, 166–8, 174, 235, 248
Tanai, General Shahnawaz 182–3
Thatcher, Margaret 3–4, 7, 45, 265
Tkachev, Anatoli 52–5, 77–8, 81–3, 93
  ceasefire negotiations with Massoud 55–8, 60–4, 66–72

W

Warner, Gerry 4–8, 227, 311

Z

Zahir Shah 25, 174, 223, 225, 290
Zia-ul-Haq, Mohammad 48, 50, 142, 180, 211–12, 226